The Dissertation Committee for Victoria Ann Davis certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Restating a Parochial Vision: A Reconsideration of Patrick Kavanagh,

Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan

Committee:

_____

Charles Rossman, Supervisor

_____

Elizabeth Butler Cullingford

_____

Barbara Harlow

_____

Thomas F. Shea

_____

Dolora Chapelle Wojciehowski

Restating a Parochial Vision: A Reconsideration of Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan

by

Victoria Ann Davis, B.A., M.A.

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Restating a Parochial Vision: A Reconsideration of Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan

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The Irish Literary Revival and the Irish Literary Renaissance are familiar models in the criticism addressing early- to mid- twentieth century Irish literature. Post-Rebellion writers who do not fit neatly into these models are often overlooked by critics or considered predominantly in light of their failure either to live up to one particular model or adequately resist it. These nonaligned writers are also rarely seen as having any relation to one another, much less forming their own tradition. This project positions a certain kind of parochialism as an alternative model for considering a number of these post-Rebellion writers and thus offers a model for exhuming other writers of this generation from critical obscurity and misrepresentation. More importantly, this model also

illuminates these writers' innovative yet often overlooked engagement with cultural forces, such as tradition, myth, history, and landscape. It also links critically three writers who are often only linked anecdotally: Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan. Early chapters focus on the development of Kavanagh's parochial vision, beginning with an examination of parochialism in the context of the revival, and then an exploration of Kavanagh's own different and emerging sense of parochialism in two early works, "Shancoduff" (1937), and "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" (1936). Kavanagh's best-known works, *The Green Fool* (1938), *The Great Hunger* (1942), and *Tarry Flynn* (1948) are examined in light of their contribution to the achievement of Kavanagh's ultimate parochial vision. In its consideration of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *An Béal Bocht* (1941) /*The Poor Mouth* (1973), the project shows how O'Brien re-creates and re-maps familiar Irish landscapes in order to establish spaces in which factors influencing the formation of national identity are negotiated. Additionally, the project explores how O'Brien's re-mapping of two less familiar landscapes in *The Third Policeman* (1941/1967) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) reveals the synthesis of metaphysical and scientific ideas into parochial understanding. The

project concludes with an examination of Behan's articulation of an "urban" parochial vision in which certain neglected Dublin populations negotiate a changing Ireland within claustrophobic tenements and prison cells.

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Introduction

As legend has it, the statue of Our Lady of Dublin at St. Mary's Abbey was saved from destruction during the Reformation by being taken to a nearby inn-yard to be used as a pig trough. What is not clear from the legend, however, is whether Our Lady was saved out of a desire to preserve her and the tradition she represented, or purely for her newfound practical utility. During this period, religious statues were often hollowed out at the back to reduce their weight and to prevent the wood from warping and splitting. Hence, some of these statues were eventually used, and thereby altered, in ways that their makers could never have anticipated. Certainly Our Lady of Dublin, which now resides at Whitefriars Street Church, is a profoundly different statue from the one that escaped destruction centuries earlier. Not only did the statue serve time as a trough, at some point it was also thoroughly whitewashed. In 1824, after a father from Whitefriars Street Church recognized and purchased her in a second-hand shop, she was stripped of the whitewash, the process destroying her original polychrome finish.

In *After Kavanagh: Patrick Kavanagh and the Discourse of Irish Poetry*, poet and critic Michael O'Loughlin uses the story of Our Lady of Dublin as a model for understanding the problems that resulted from the translation of Irish literature into the English language during the 19th century.[1] In most cases, the only literature that survived was the literature that could be "translated" in some fashion. O'Loughlin mentions in particular the case of Thomas Moore, the author of the popular *Irish Melodies* (1807-1835), whose works endured into the twentieth century as the only connection many Irish people had to this past. As O' Loughlin states, Moore did not endure because he was a great poet; "it is enough that he merely existed."[2] Because he presented an overly Romantic version of Ireland, primarily to an English audience, he was disparaged by a diverse group, including Patrick Kavanagh, James Joyce, and the Irish Irelanders. Like a statue that could be hollowed out and used in a barnyard, the works of a nineteenth century writer such as Thomas Moore came to signify very different things to different audiences in twentieth century Ireland.

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[1] Michael O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh: Patrick Kavanagh and the Discourse of Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1985), 14.

[2] O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh: Patrick Kavanagh and the Discourse of Irish Poetry*, 12.

With a slight change of emphasis, the story of Our Lady of Dublin can also serve as a model for understanding the problems faced by writers in post-Rebellion Ireland such as Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, Kate O'Brien, Brendan Behan, and the writers associated with *The Bell* such as Sean O'Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell. These writers were charged with a task similar to that of the individuals who rebuilt the Irish churches and hunted down religious objects in the wake of the Reformation and the Persecution. Inheriting the cultural rubble left by both the Rebellion and the colonial past, these writers were "obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments [had] been irretrievably lost."[3] And unlike the clergy who had little choice but to attempt to restore the churches and religious objects they salvaged, these Irish writers were faced with multiple, conflicting options. Should they build on the available remnants of culture to create something entirely new, or should they attempt to use these remnants to reconstruct a tradition that many of them knew only second-hand?

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[3] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London, 1992), 11; qtd. in Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 333. Here, of course, Rushdie writes about exiles, but the passage also applies to the writers who remained in Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Of course, these post-Rebellion writers were also writing in the shadow of the Irish Literary Revival and the Irish Literary Renaissance, both of which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. The revivalists, such as Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory, employed literature as a means of "resuscitating" ancient Irish values and culture in order to create a new national culture that would, in the words of John Wilson Foster, "transform the reality of the Ireland they inhabited."[4] Yeats did this by invoking Celtic mythology and legend; Synge accomplished the same goals by developing a literary expertise of the Gaeltacht. The reality the revivalists projected, however, ignored the reality of several other Irelands, primarily the petty bourgeoisie and small Catholic farmers who came to prominence after the Rebellion.

Working in contradistinction to the revival were the writers of the literary renaissance, which included Joyce, Brinsley MacNamara, and George Moore. These predominantly Catholic writers produced realist fiction that Foster describes as "Irish fiction proper"—or, more specifically, as fiction "written by Irish writers, self-consciously set in Ireland" with the purpose of presenting to readers "the Irish experience."

[4] John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), xvi.

In presenting the Irish experience, these writers also hoped to "embody in their work the universal."[5] With the exception of Joyce, however, many had their roles as mediators of the Irish experience usurped by the revivalists. As Foster explains, the revivalists "did not dam the flow of native fiction," but instead formed "an artistic mainstream" that caused other contemporary Irish writing to "appear by comparison as a middlebrow tributary."[6]

Having more in common with the writers of the Irish renaissance, post-Rebellion writers such as Kavanagh, O'Brien, and Behan began their careers in a profoundly difficult position. For one, as middle class Catholics, they had inherited a literary tradition that devalued their identity. Second, by writing on the other side of a historical moment from the revivalists, these writers saw clearly the changes wrought by the Rebellion, the Black and Tan War, and the Civil War. The ideals and abstractions that had inspired these events—and, thus, much of the work of the revivalists—engendered only suspicion in post-Rebellion writers. Third, these writers inherited their storytelling gifts in an age when traditional ideas about narrative and fiction were under scrutiny. As a

[5] Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*, xix.
[6] Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*, xii.

result, they had to find both a way to express themselves and their experience, while also addressing the ever-increasing skepticism about the nature of fiction, realism, and fantasy.[7]

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these writers turned inward, just as the emerging Free State turned inward to focus on the issues of nation-building. Unlike the writers of the Irish renaissance, who desired to embody the universal, post-Rebellion writers had a tendency toward parochialism, with Kavanagh being the most obvious example. Throughout his career, Kavanagh tended to focus on matters directly influencing his village, Inniskeen, in County Monaghan. He dealt in specifics rather than symbols; in *The Great Hunger*, for example, Kavanagh's depiction of Maguire is so detailed and idiosyncratic that it emphatically resists the standard peasant stereotype. This is not to suggest, however, that Kavanagh's concerns were limited to local events and gossip. In the bounded settings of his work, Kavanagh consistently portrayed the interaction between the forces of modernity and tradition. His parishes were not the idyllic, unchanging settings of the revival. Instead, he insisted that these parishes were and always had been sites

[7] Declan Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism: *At Swim-Two-Birds*," in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 511.

altered by history and, just as important, that they had not yet been accurately represented in literature.

Thus, Kavanagh's parochial vision strove for specificity of representation, and it valued individual experience, community, and an idiosyncratic, comedic vision. It is crucial to note that while Kavanagh does define parochialism later in his career, it is not a deliberately orchestrated movement, but instead a response to existing literary models that made him feel as if his own experience was not worth expressing. In this dissertation, I begin with Kavanagh and the development of his parochial vision and move to a discussion of Flann O'Brien, Kavanagh's Dublin-based contemporary.

Due to their prominence in the "great hatred, little room" atmosphere of mid-century literary Dublin,[8] Kavanagh and O'Brien are often linked anecdotally, most notably in Anthony Cronin's *Dead as Doornails*, John Ryan's *How We Stood Our Rounds,* and Brian Behan's play *The Begrudgers*. Yet their styles and milieu rarely, if ever, put them in the same critical orbit; Kavanagh was a romantically-inclined rural poet and

[8] The phrase is from Yeats's "Remorse for Intemperate Words" (1932), first published in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

O'Brien was a predominantly urban novelist more inclined towards modernist (or postmodernist) tropes. Like Kavanagh, however, O'Brien was staunchly Catholic and had a middle-class work ethic that made him both suspicious of and openly hostile towards what he saw as the bohemian posturing of his fellow writers. Most importantly, however, O'Brien showed the same inclination as Kavanagh towards challenges of the period and also turned inwards. In his works, O'Brien shows a similar specificity of location and emphasis on idiosyncratic perspectives; in particular, he remaps familiar landscapes and recasts both traditional and modern ideas in the language and understanding of what he called "The Plain People of Ireland."

Finally, I address Brendan Behan as representative of other writers of the period who showed a similar parochial vision. Like Kavanagh and O'Brien, Behan sets confined spaces—a prison ward, a room in a bordello—as sites in which the forces that influence Irish identity (rural and urban; modern and traditional) are negotiated. Behan, however, extends the range of these forces to include a more explicit discussion of class and sexuality. In a Behan's works and life, we also see a sharpening of the crises of identity faced not only by Kavanagh and O'Brien, but other

post-Rebellion writers. Thus Behan becomes a productive model for an exploration of other relevant writers.

In the decades during which Kavanagh, O'Brien, and Behan wrote, Ireland was in a state of profound transition. Many of the changes the nation experienced had to do with a clash between tradition and modernity, which created an economic and cultural phenomenon that Declan Kiberd calls "underdevelopment." In an economic sense, "underdevelopment" refers to the failure of the framers of the Free State to emphasize all areas of development.[9] Some areas, such as politics and the arts, showed the positive effects of modernization, but others, like education, industry, and agriculture, did not. This "combined and uneven development," [10] to use the language of Marxism, and the economic dilemmas it produced were most prevalent in rural areas.[11]

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[9] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*, 479.

[10] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 274.

[11] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 2.

As sociologists Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly argue, modernization drew the rural population into a new economic system that exposed them to hazards they would not have experienced in more traditional societies.[12] Rural workers became more reliant on the exchange of currency rather than the traditional barter of goods and services, and were, consequently, less self-sufficient.[13] In rural areas, modernization also led to the development of a class system comprised of the bourgeoisie who employed labor, the middle class who held small amounts of land, and the landless workers who were forced to sell their labor to make a living.[14] The result was a rural population marked by material acquisitiveness and internal tensions—very different from the one idealized by the revivalists.

The urban environment was changing as well. As rural-born populations moved from regions such as the Gaeltacht to the city and built their own communities, Dublin felt increasingly less like a sleek

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[12] Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr., Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Clark and Donnelly (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 4-5.

[13] Deborah Fleming, *"A man who does not exist" The Irish Peasant in the Work of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 32.

[14] Clark and Donnelly, Introduction, 7.

modern capital and more like a collection of villages, each maintaining a discrete identity and customs.[15] In addition, the suburbs were siphoning off urban populations from both ends of the economic spectrum. On the one hand, well-off city dwellers who desired the romantic idyll of country life but were not willing to give up the convenience and jobs of the city, were drawn to wealthier suburbs like Blackrock.[16] As more Irish urbanites became suburbanites, the city became the place where the suburb dwellers worked, did their shopping, and entertained themselves, but it was not where they lived.[17] At the same time, however, legislation in 1931 and 1932 led to a series of slum clearances by which lower-income families were moved from the city center to housing schemes in the suburbs.[18] Brendan Behan's family moved to the suburb of Crumlin in 1937 as part of these clearances. They saw the clearances as having a more nefarious intent, however, believing that de Valera hoped to break up possible

[15] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 513.

[16] Joseph Brady, "Introduction," in Ruth McManus, *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and Suburbs* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 13.

[17] Brady, "Introduction," 14.

[18] McManus, *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and Suburbs,* 134.

anarchist hot spots in the inner city.[19] As a result of the influx of rural populations and the flight of urbanites to the suburbs, the modern city seemed no longer true to its controlling idea, that it was "a man-made replica of the universe" where law and order prevailed over chaos. [20]

These conditions had specific implications for Kavanagh, O'Brien and their peers, as did the cultural underdevelopment of Free State Ireland. Perhaps the most significant implication was that post-rebellion and post-revival writers faced a kind of cultural famine. They lived, as Declan Kiberd states, with the

> helplessness of one who lives where there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, along with the obligation to express. … Reared in a cultural vacuum, fatigued by the representational naiveté of realist artists of the colonial power, and twitching with the urge to leave some trace behind, he can feed only on abstinence.[21]

Most members of this generation had received, at least in part, a colonial education that emphasized rote learning of information of little use to

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[19] Micheal O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* Boulder: CO: Roberts Rinehart, 1999) 31. Behan fictionalizes his family's move in the radio play, *Moving Out* (1952).

[20] Joseph M. Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," in *The Irish Writer and the City*, Irish Literary Studies, no. 18, ed. Maurice Harmon (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984), 115.

[21] Declan Kiberd, "Underdeveloped Comedy—Patrick Kavanagh," *The Southern Review*, 31 (1995): 714, Academic Search Premier; Internet; 2004.

anyone, especially rural students. Kavanagh describes this colonial education in the posthumously published *By Night Unstarred*:

> There was, it is true, what was called traditional learning and the love of learning but this was for the most part mere sentimentality. It was—even when it repeated the old poems—nothing better than the hunger for useless information which is satisfied by the popular press. The same was true of the hedge schools where pedantic Greek and Latin were taught parrot-like and in the same way the dictionary devoured.[22]

Access to popular Irish writers was also limited; Irish publishing was limited except for schoolbooks and specialty publications. Consequently, most books came from English publishers.[23] The resulting scarcity of literature outside of that published in the schoolbooks left an indelible mark on writers of this generation. Because colonial education had left them bereft of what Daniel Corkery called "realist Irish models," these writers were starting from a tradition that they had been taught to shun, if they had been taught about it at all.[24] If they were familiar at all with the revival, its tropes and its definition of Irishness were unsuitable because these young Irish writers were most likely of the very classes—rural

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[22] Patrick Kavanagh, *By Night Unstarred: An Autobiographical Novel*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (The Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1977), 100.

[23] Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 10.

[24] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born Again Romantic* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1991), 6.

middle class, urban upper middle class, urban lower middle class—that the revival either criticized or ignored.[25]

Another problem in post-rebellion Ireland was the devotion of the government to the school-based language revival. Not only did this affect the quality of education school children received, but the dedication of resources to this one project led to uneven development elsewhere.[26] In the 19th century, the justification for replacing Irish with English was based on ideas of economic and social progress. In the fledgling Free State, however, the inducements for people to support the language revival were entirely cultural and ultimately less than convincing because the only Irish authors to receive international acclaim wrote in English.[27] Within Ireland, one outlet for Irish writers was An Gúm, the publications branch of the Department of Education, which was established by the Cumann na nGaedheal government in 1925. An Gúm's purpose was to supply textbooks and fiction in Irish for both educational and recreational reading. Poor translations and mediocre original work left the general

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[25] Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival*, xvii.

[26] Adrian Kelly, "Cultural Imperatives: The Irish language Revival and the Educational System," in *Ireland in the 1930s: New Perspectives*, ed. Joost Augusteijn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 30.

[27] Kelly, "Cultural Imperatives: The Irish language Revival and the Educational System," 32.

public uninspired by An Gúm's efforts, however. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, author and political activist, dismissed the An Gúm publications, which he proffered were "as harmless as cement or tractor novels" and argued that the publications "presumed that everything that was to be written in Irish was for children or nuns."[28] The audience for An Gúm's publications soured on the language revival due to the pressure put on them by the government. In 1939, the nationalist newspaper the *Leader* reported that young people had lost interest in reading Irish because too many texts in Irish had as their subject matter the language and the revival effort.[29]

As a consequence of the spotty educational opportunities available to them, many writers of the post-Rebellion period were at least in part self-taught. Kavanagh, for example, learned to write poetry by emulating the pastoralists and romantics anthologized in his schoolbooks, especially Wordsworth. Flann O'Brien had slightly more exposure than Kavanagh to traditional Irish writing, but his education was also haphazard and self-

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[28] Qtd. in Burns Library, Boston College "Free State Art: Conclusion," *Free State Art: Judging Ireland by its Book Covers*, [Virtual Exhibit: Summer 2004] available from http://www.bc.edu/libraries/centers/burns/exhibits/virtual/bkcovers/; Internet; accessed 20 June 2004.

[29] Kelly, "Cultural Imperatives: The Irish language Revival and the Educational System," 37.

directed. O'Brien grew up in a family of Irish speakers. His earliest exposure to English in print was through comic books. His reading in English was essentially self-taught, and fueled predominantly by English writers such as Dickens, Trollope, Defoe, Stevenson, and Conan Doyle. James Stephens represented the revival in his childhood reading, and two Irish poets of the 19th century, James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson are also represented, as well as Douglas Hyde, with *A Literary History of Ireland*.[30]

The cultural underdevelopment that Kavanagh and O'Brien faced informed their decisions to be *working* writers. Flann O'Brien had a full-time career as a civil servant and maintained a long and consistent run in the *Irish Times* writing his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column as Myles na gCopaleen. Kavanagh also relied on bread-and-butter journalism work, such as reviewing movies, for survival. Raised in middle-class families and familiar with economic hardship, they were suspicious of their bohemian colleagues who did not share their work ethic. As Kavanagh states in his *Self-Portrait*:

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[30] Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm, 1998), 16-19.

> … part of my poverty stricken upbringing was my belief in respectability—a steady job, decency. The bohemian rascals living it up in basements and in mountain hideouts horrified me. … Instinctively I realized that they were embittered people worshipping the poor man's poet. Their left-wingery was defeat.[31]

O'Brien is similarly critical of bohemian artists and chastised them for shirking their civic duties, stating that "we are not making any Ireland. We just live here… some of us even *work* here."[32]

O'Brien and Kavanagh's choices to pursue the financial security of journalism is understandable; in her study of popular reading material in Ireland in the 1930's, Elizabeth Russell argues that the Irish audience was more interested in light romances and westerns and periodicals like *Ireland's Own* and *Catholic Fireside* than anything by James Joyce. [33] However, the resentment it engendered amongst other writers and critics highlights several aspects of the problem of literary and cultural identity in post-Rebellion Ireland. As Anthony Cronin explains, Ireland was to writers of this generation not simply a place, but a circumstance. This circumstance demanded daily engagement, but could also defeat them "if

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[31] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait* (Dublin: Dolman Press, 1964), 12-13.

[32] Qtd. in Stephen Jones, *A Flann O'Brien Reader* (New York: Viking, 1978), 342.

[33] Elizabeth Russell, "Holy Crosses, Guns and Roses: Themes in Popular Reading Material," in *Ireland in the 1930's*: *New Perspectives*, ed. Joost Augusteijn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 15-16.

they engaged with it in the wrong way."[34] Consequently, there was a rift between working writers like O'Brien, who chose daily engagement and pursued some economic security, and more bohemian writers, who pursued their art either for art's sake, or for entry into the coterie of elite intellectuals. Both the working and the bohemian writers were vexed not only by the suspicions of their respective audiences (who were becoming increasingly middlebrow in their tastes) but also, and perhaps more strongly, by their suspicions of each other's representation of intellectual life in Ireland.

Kavanagh, O'Brien, and their peers also share a critical reception that emphasizes their failures. While they are seen as influential in certain, carefully defined ways, and are even praised for moments of brilliance, they are more often criticized for what they fail to be—clearly modernist, revivalist, or postmodern. Seamus Deane, for example, describes

[34] Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, 192-193.

Kavanagh as writing with "contentment at the spectacle of an ordinary but still miraculous world."[35] Interestingly, Deane makes sure to emphasize Kavanagh's second-rate status while also admitting that he has trouble classifying the nature of Kavanagh's work. Kavanagh, he states, "is so obviously a lesser poet than Yeats and yet he is also so obviously more influential in Ireland that one is hard put to define his attraction or his quality."[36]

Most scholarship about O'Brien can be considered a detour from scholarship about more prominent Irish writers such as Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett and, to a lesser extent, British modernists such as T. S. Eliot. Critics not only tend to compare O'Brien's structure, language, and ideas to those of Joyce and Beckett, but also tend to use these comparisons to argue for O'Brien's very validity as an object of study. Critic Matthew Lamberti, for example, argues that O'Brien's work is valuable to Irish and post-colonial

[35] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivalists: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 16.

[36] Seamus Deane, "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism: A Survey," in *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour, 1975), 10.

studies simply because it sheds light on Yeats's anti-imperialism.[37] Along these same lines, Keith Booker offers two choices for reading O'Brien:

> … as if he were Eliot (and thus celebrating the greatness of a past tradition that is no longer functional because the modern world is too seedy and chaotic to support it) and … as if he were Joyce (importing mythical materials into a modern context to challenge their authority by suggesting that they were never what they were cracked up to be in the first place).[38]

Granted, the comparisons to these writers are neither unwarranted nor entirely unwelcome, especially those promoting his work. Many editions of O'Brien's novels bear Joyce's seal of approval that O'Brien is "a real writer, with the true comic spirit." [39] However, such associations have

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[37] Matthew J. Lamberti, "*The Third Policeman* as a Re-Vision of Yeats" in *New Voices in Irish Criticism*, ed. P.J. Mathews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 65-66.

[38] Keith M. Booker, "Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?: The Politics of *At Swim-Two-Birds*" in *A Casebook on Flann O'Brien's* At Swim-Two-Birds, ed. Thomas C. Foster [volume online]; available from http://www.centerforbookculture.org/casebooks/casebook_swim/booker.html ; Internet; accessed 19 December 2003.

[39] Although O'Brien was to later complain, "If I hear that word Joyce again, I will surely froth at the gob," he asked Niall Sheridan to take a copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* to Paris in 1939 to get Joyce's opinion on the work. Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1991), 81. This story might be a diversion from the truth, however. Brendan P. O Hehir suggests that this commonly used blurb might be apocryphal, citing that the only mention of O'Brien in Ellman's biography of Joyce is in reference to a hoax. Brendan O Hehir, "Flann O'Brien and the Big World," in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England, and the World, Vol. 3: National Images and Stereotypes*, eds. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), 207.

often led readers and critics alike to approach O'Brien with the same assumptions they hold for the other writers. And, because he fails to satisfy many of these expectations, O'Brien is generally cast as a literary "diversion." Tellingly, Dylan Thomas's quote on the back of the Plume edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* suggests that the novel is just the book to give your sister "if she's a loud, dirty, boozy girl." A comparison with texts of greater cultural authority is implied.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how Kavanagh and O'Brien's parochial visions are manifested in their works and career, giving particular emphasis to the importance of re-creating and remapping familiar landscapes, both literary and not, to reflect this parochial vision. In many ways, this project is a response to contemporary critic's tendency to blame these writers for failing to achieve things they never really set out to do. My intention is to address these writers in terms of the culture that produced them rather than critical models that do not suit their projects. In doing so, I hope to recast them in light of their achievements rather than continue to marginalize them due to their perceived failures.

In chapters 1 and 2, I focus on the development of Kavanagh's parochial vision, beginning with a discussion of parochialism in the

context of the revival, and then an examination of Kavanagh's own different and emerging sense of parochialism in two early works, "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" (1936) and "Shancoduff" (1937). In chapter 2, I turn to two of Kavanagh's best-known works, *The Great Hunger* (1942) and *Tarry Flynn* (1948). Here, I show how each work contributed to the achievement of Kavanagh's ultimate parochial vision. Of central importance to Kavanagh criticism, I additionally show that the *The Green Fool* (1938) is not simply a failed autobiography, but rather a testing ground for many of the ideas that come to full fruition in the later works.

In chapters 3 and 4, I turn to Flann O'Brien and his re-creation and re-mapping of familiar Irish landscapes in order to establish spaces in which factors influencing the formation of national identity, such as rural and urban, modern and traditional, historical and mythological, are negotiated. In chapter 3, I look at the novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *An Béal Bocht* (1941) /*The Poor Mouth* (1973), in which he alters the representation of two well-known literary landscapes, Dublin and the Gaeltacht, in order to show how these spaces are altered by an idiosyncratic understanding not only of their history and the culture they

represent, but also how literary and cultural ideas are altered and put to unexpected uses by disparate audiences.

In chapter 4, I explore how O'Brien again remaps familiar landscapes, but this time two underrepresented ones—the Irish midlands in *The Third Policeman* (1941/1967) and the suburbs surrounding Dublin in *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). In remapping these landscapes, O'Brien truly achieves polysemy, a mixture of the mundane and miraculous. Metaphysical struggles about the nature of eternity and the nature of Providence are waged in these banal landscapes. In *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Brien shows the danger of adopting ideas, particularly scientific and metaphysical ideas, without conscience or faith, underscoring the resilience of middle-class values in the face of modernity.

Chapter 1

Remapping the Parish: Patrick Kavanagh and the Development of a Parochial Vision

According to Michael O'Loughlin, critics often portray Patrick Kavanagh as an "outlaw" because he was the first Irish poet writing in English to avoid having a problematic relationship with either his nationality or the language in which he wrote.[1] Unlike the Anglo-Irish writers of the revival, for example, Kavanagh had no need to prove his authenticity and could therefore take more risks in his representations of Irish experience. O'Loughlin compares the straightforward, experiential feel of Kavanagh's "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" to the strained, self-consciously aesthetic language of Synge's "Beg-Innish." Not only do Synge's characters—"M'Riarty Jim" and "Kateen-Beag"—conjure up images of stock stage-Irish figures when placed next to Kavanagh's less colorfully named "Billy Brennan," but Kavanagh's native confidence also allows him to bring a canonical English figure, Alexander Selkirk, into his

[1] Michael O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh: Patrick Kavanagh and the Discourse of Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1985), 18.

own literary landscape. Synge, caught up in what Kavanagh called the "Irish Thing," never took such a risk for fear that his carefully constructed mask of authenticity might slip.

Critics also explain Kavanagh's seeming lack of anxiety, O'Loughlin continues, by asserting that the poet drew his authority from neither the revival nor Anglo-Irish discourse but instead from deep within the nineteenth century when "Irish literature in the English language was born."[2] Kavanagh benefited from the work of "Irish-Irish" poets such as James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson, who contended first-hand with the translation of the Irish cultural heritage into another language. O'Loughlin argues that Mangan's translations of Irish works into the English language show best what was happening to Irish culture; much would be lost, but also much that was new and enriching could now emerge. Mangan's translations thus begat a new genre of powerful and original poetry, what O'Loughlin describes as "poems written in English by an Irishman."[3] As a result, Kavanagh and other writers of his generation would not have to wrestle with the bitterness and humiliation of this cultural transformation; that struggle could be relegated to the past.

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[2] O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh*, 12.
[3] O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh*, 14.

Additionally, critics often assume that Kavanagh was instinctively aware of his role as "a new kind of poet" in a "new kind of Ireland."[4] Neither Kavanagh's final conception of himself as an artist, nor the "new" Ireland it heralded, emerged so smoothly, however. Kavanagh did not formally articulate his vision of parochialism—his signature idiom-- from provincialism until 1952, long after the publication of the works for which he is best known: *The Green Fool* (1938), *The Great Hunger* (1942), and *Tarry Flynn* (1948).[5] Consequently, critics assume that parochialism, for Kavanagh, was an unattainable literary ideal—an idea he arrived at late in his career and then held up as a "parish myth" to counteract the Yeats-influenced obsession with a national literary myth. However, this assumption ignores how the development of Kavanagh's parochial vision can be seen in each work. Throughout his career, Kavanagh's work was

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[4] O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh*, 18.

[5] In addition, Kavanagh did not begin to emphasize the importance of comedy or comedic detachment until even later, most significantly in his statement that "Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy, not fully born." Patrick Kavanagh, "Author's Notes," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1964), xiv. In 1956, he lauds the comic detachment achieved in his favorite books: "their authors are not afraid to bend, to let themselves go, to be outrageous. Theirs is the philosophy of men who in a wonderful way do not care." Patrick Kavanagh, "Studies in the Technique of Poetry: Extracts from 10 Lectures," in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1986) 242.

shaped by the profound tensions rural Ireland experienced as the nation moved from tradition to modernity, and by his own ambivalence toward the rural artist's place in this transitional moment. Kavanagh's conception of parochialism developed accordingly.

In what follows, I show that Kavanagh struggled to achieve that which critics often portray as his natural literary inheritance. Just as the emerging Free State attempted to construct a coherent identity from the rubble of its own history, so Kavanagh sought to create a unique literary identity out of the cultural rubble that he had at his disposal—bits of English romanticism, Gaelic tradition, and even the Irish literary revival. Belying his own philosophy of "not caring" and O'Loughlin's assertion that he was confident in his position as a "new kind of poet" for a "new kind of Ireland," Kavanagh instead reinvented and rewrote himself obsessively throughout his career, variously embracing and discarding the roles of the romantic farmer-poet, the activist rural spokesman, the comic realist, and finally the sophisticated urban critic and poet.

The key elements of his works are the landscape, the peasant, and the poet. By exploring the shifting relationships between these three elements in *The Green Fool*, *The Great Hunger*, and *Tarry Flynn*, we may

trace the development of Kavanagh's literary identity and, more specifically, the emergence of his understanding of parochialism. By doing so, we also see the Kavanagh that many critics have heretofore overlooked—the poet struggling to define himself as an artist and to establish his literary legacy.

In this chapter, I discuss the development of Kavanagh's parochial vision, comparing the revival uses of the landscape, peasant, and poet to Kavanagh's. I then show how these elements operate in two early poems, "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" and "Shancoduff." In Chapter 2, I will discuss the evolving nature and purpose of his parochial vision throughout Kavanagh's career, as seen in the epic poem *The Great Hunger*, and the autobiographical works *The Green Fool* and *Tarry Flynn*.

The Landscape, the Peasant, and the Poet in the Revival

According to Yeats in *Four Years*, *1887-1891,* nations are unified by an image or a collection of related images through which the poet is able to reinforce, or even re-create, a national myth. Just as Shelley had used classical mythology in *Prometheus Unbound* to encourage revolution over oppression, so too could the revivalists use Celtic legend and the Irish

landscape to prevail over the tyranny of colonialism: "Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?" Yeats asks. "Might I not… create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in Prometheus' stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulben?" [6] For Yeats, then, Celtic legend has the same cultural status as classical mythology, and the Irish landscape and figures had symbolic power similar to that of the Indian Caucasus, Prometheus, and Mercury.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley not only provides a model for the creation of national myth, but he also shifts the harsh realities of history into the psychic realm; history is not an absolute, but instead an intellectual proposition that privileges the personal and the imaginative. Similarly, Standish James O'Grady in *History of Ireland, the Heroic Period* (1878) states that history must have "sympathy, imagination, creation" in order to be sincere, otherwise "[o]ut of the sad leavings of the past, how can even the most cunning mechanical arrangement evolve a living,

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[6] William Butler Yeats, *Four Years 1887-1891* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1921); available from Project Gutenberg: http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/fryrs10.txt; Internet; accessed 20 November 2004.

adequate, affecting representation of the life of our ancestors."[7] To this end of adding "sympathy, imagination, creation" to history, O'Grady opens his *History* with the "Map of Ireland in the Heroic Times." On this map, places are labeled not with their geographic names, but with the names of the figures—"Friends of Cuchulain," "Son of Fergus Mac Roy"—that once inhabited each area. By making legend the focus of the map that opens the book, O'Grady privileges an imaginative, personal relationship to history over a fact-based, geographic one.

The revivalists, and Yeats especially, were heavily influenced by O'Grady's presentation of land and history as metaphor. Seamus Deane states that O'Grady's work "so coloured Yeats's mind that he believed all modern Irish writing owed part of its distinctive tincture" to it.[8] Seeing land and history tied through mythology and metaphor allowed the revivalists, most of them Anglo-Irish and Protestant "outsiders," to place themselves at the heart of national myth. Figures such as Yeats, Synge, and Austin Clarke made history palatable to their tastes by imagining it as a version of their personalities; they glamorized the Ascendancy, the

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[7] Standish James O'Grady, *History of Ireland: Vol. I, The Heroic Period* (1878; New York: Lemma, 1970), iv.

[8] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 34.

peasantry, or the medieval clergy, and then, in turn, used their re-imagined history to mount an attack upon the modern bourgeoisie.[9] Like bards of the heroic period, revivalist writers recorded the stories of the giants, both literal and figurative, on whose shoulders they wished to stand.

In addition, by imbuing the land with mythos, the revivalists could remove what Foster calls "certain unwelcome and inconvenient Irelands" from the national panorama.[10] Just as William Wordsworth did in "Tintern Abbey," these writers made metaphoric and aesthetic use of the land, thereby clearing it of troublesome natives, in this case farmers and rural workers who had been rendered less-than-heroic by the realities of history.[11] Envisioning the land as an aesthetic or spiritual object rather than a site for labor also revealed the class difference between the

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[9] Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 32-33.

[10] John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993), xvii.

[11] James Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976), 163. Although Turner writes about English poetry, his discussion of the political reasons for the removal of labor and laborers from poetic landscapes has similarities to the removal of these same figures from revivalist works. The laborer and his work are a painful reminder of a messy history that taints the perfection of the scene: "The pastoral and sylvan scene is glorified, though the history of the countryside taught that this most 'natural' scenery is the result of the most vicious repression" (163).

revivalists and the peasant. As Raymond Williams shows in *The Country and the City*, the use of the word *landscape* implies the distance and separation of owner and planner from land and worker: "A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation."[12] For the revivalist, the land in its state as metaphor remained untainted by the Ireland they wished to overlook—one irrevocably changed by northern industrialization, general urbanization, and the rise of the middle class.

These metaphoric clearances were revolutionary acts; the revivalists hoped to change history and reinvent Ireland. They realized, however, that in doing so, they must remake not only the landscape but the Irish people as well.[13] National aspirations had to be reawakened in the Irish, who had lost a sense of their true culture and past nobility.[14] What was required, wrote Yeats, was a "pastoral mythmaker," a figure who would not create myth, but would instead inspire poets to the write

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[12] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 120.

[13] Declan Kiberd, "Decolonising the Mind," in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?* ed. Jacqueline Genet, Irish Literary Studies, no. 49 (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), 121.

[14] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 249.

works that would in turn move the Irish people.[15] This role fell squarely on the shoulders of the Irish peasant.

We see this desire to create both the myth, as well as the inspiration and audience for that myth, in Yeats's poem "The Fisherman." In describing his fisherman, "A man who does not exist,/A man who is but a dream," Yeats imagines his "own race," for whom he would write poetry.[16] Like Yeats's fisherman, the revivalist peasant was entirely fictional—a spiritually and economically pure creation who, by working "a holy land where spirits lived in every rath and hill,"[17] would embody the collective memory of the nation. [18]

The link between spirituality and pure national economy also relied on the peasant's poverty. Initially, colonizers saw Ireland's poverty as justification for external government. However, the nationalists reversed this stereotype so that the peasants were no longer the symbol of all that was wrong in an ungovernable Ireland, but the representation of

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[15] Deborah Fleming, *"A man who does not exist" The Irish Peasant in the Work of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 10.

[16] William Butler Yeats, "The Fisherman," in *Selected Poems and Three Plays*, ed. M.L. Rosenthal (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 61-62.

[17] Fleming, *"A man who does not exist,"* 41.

[18] Fleming, *"A man who does not exist,"*67

how Ireland could be reborn.[19] The revivalists' view was that poverty-- as long as it was rural and Irish-- spoke of a deep spirituality, lack of materialism, and a communion with nature. Because peasants were associated with the landscape, which in its metaphoric state was clear of modernization and industrialization, they were allegedly free from the complexities of social and commercial relations.[20]

Thus, for Yeats and his peers, Ireland was revolutionary because it was traditional; it was the only European country in which aristocrats and peasants could succeed over materialism and utilitarianism. [21] Of course, more recent scholars have shown that the revivalists' view of Ireland was inaccurate. According to Clark and Donnelly, modernization weakened the bonds between the peasant and the old elite, who, even though they typically exploited the peasant's labor, had also provided protection and aid in times of trouble.[22] The increased reliance on central government and increased bureaucracy that came with modernization could lead to

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[19] Fleming, *"A man who does not exist,"*46.

[20] Jacqueline Genet, "Yeats and the Myth of Rural Ireland" in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?*, 141.

[21] Fleming, *"A man who does not exist,"*41.

[22] Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr., Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Clark and Donnelly (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 6.

peasants being even further exploited by elites, who found their own resources strained. Thus, the elite's relationship to the peasants became mercenary.[23] The revivalists wanted to reverse this process and reinstate the more traditional and feudal connection between the elite and the peasant. They tried to do this by recreating the figure that had historically moved between these two worlds—the poet, or bard.

By focusing on Ireland's heroic and bardic past, the revivalists were attempting to return to a time when there was both an aristocratic and a peasant audience for popular poetry. Ironically, they chose to emulate a time and a culture in which they did not actually participate—the society eulogized by Daniel Corkery in *Hidden Ireland* (1924). Corkery's Ireland was entirely Gaelic; the peasants, the owners of the big houses, and the bard who moved freely among them shared not only a knowledge of the Gaelic language, but also the language of the land. In addition, the Gaelic peasant and the Gaelic elite enjoyed a close relationship because they were, according to Corkery, "a people involved in one common ruin;"[24]

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[23] Clark and Donnelly, Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914, 7*.

[24] Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* (1924; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, Ltd, 1975), 65.

both the Gaelic big houses and the Gaelic peasantry were in decline, soon to be supplanted by the Anglo-Irish ascendancy.

A key difference between the bard of Corkery's *Hidden Ireland* and the revival poet is that Corkery's bard was also a peasant. In the revival model, the poet speaks for the peasant who, having little access to sophisticated means of self-expression, was assumed illiterate and in need of a translator. When Yeats introduces a "peasant" author like William Carleton, for example, Yeats emphasizes the raw, authentic emotion of the work, noting however that it might be marred by ignorance and a sense of frustration: "The true peasant was at last speaking, stammering, illogically, bitterly, but none the less with the deep and mournful accents of the people."[25] By assuming this authoritative tone, the revivalist poets took on the role of cultural experts—anthropologists or folklorists who disinterred the old traditions and acted, condescendingly, as much-needed spokespersons for the "stammering" peasants. Such acts of translation not only created artifacts out of a cultural moment, but they also provided to the "expert" evidence that could be used to make a territorial claim on property, both private and national. In a sense, the act

[25] W.B. Yeats, from *Representative Irish Tales*; qtd. in Genet, "Yeats and the Myth of Rural Ireland," 140.

of translation itself created a sense of ownership of that material by the expert who translated it.[26]

Gregory Castle contends that Ireland's long history of being under anthropological scrutiny allowed the revival to appropriate and re-signify Irish culture. What the revivalists were doing was nothing new; interest in the customs and stories of the Irish country people had been increasing throughout the nineteenth century, reaching a peak after the Famine.[27] In carrying out their project, the revivalists felt that they were resisting not only the misrepresentations generated by British colonists, but also, and perhaps more significantly, those generated by Irish-Ireland nationalists.[28] The revivalists wanted not simply to represent, but to also correct, restore, and elevate traditions to their former grandeur.[29]

The Land, the Peasant, and the Poet in Kavanagh

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[26] Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 23.

[27] Edward Hirsch, "The Imaginary Irish Peasant," *PMLA* 106 (1991): 1116.

[28] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* 11. Also, as Declan Kiberd points out, Hyde's invention of Ireland happened in the decades between the 1880s and World War I—the same moment when English leaders were redesigning the image of England. (Declan Kiberd, "Decolonising the Irish Mind," 124).

[29] Fleming, "*A man who does not exist,*" 39.

One problem with the revivalists' forays into anthropology and folklore, however, was that they were granted an authority they did not deserve.[30] It was assumed that they owned legend simply because they re-created it in their image. With this sense of ownership came the desire to mediate everything that came after, too, even to the point of delivering a modified version of the tradition to its native inheritors. Yeats, for example, wrote in a letter to Katherine Tynan that he was preserving old texts for future Irish writers: "It was meant for Irish poets. They should draw on it for plots and atmosphere. [They] will find plenty of workable subjects." [31] The fictions of the revival were so pervasive that both audiences and critics expect, even today, that all representations of the rural, including those from peasant authors, will use the same tropes and the same language. This expectation has had a profound influence upon the reception and critical treatment of a number of Irish writers in the twentieth century, Patrick Kavanagh especially. O'Loughlin is typical of many critics when he expresses surprise that Kavanagh's poetic authority

[30] Castle notes that Evans-Wentz's *Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911) cites revivalists as experts rather than the other way around. See Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* 12.

[31] Qtd. in Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* 42.

was derived primarily from his own life: "somehow we expect Kavanagh to derive his poetic authority from Yeats."[32]

To be fair, Kavanagh did derive some of his tropes and language not only from Yeats, but also from many other sources, both British and Irish. But Kavanagh used these sources in a way that was both distinctive and significant. Seamus Heaney, for example, calls Patrick Kavanagh "the Van Gogh, rather than the Cézanne" of Monaghan,[33] meaning that Kavanagh, like Van Gogh, developed his style opportunistically rather than organically. He absorbed influences and used his own experiences to adapt these influences into his own particular idiom. In his literary opportunism, he is not so much a maker of things but as Heaney calls him, a "taker of verses, a grabber of them."[34] He explored the revival tropes of the peasant, the poet and the landscape, but configured them in new ways to serve both his literary and career goals.

Kavanagh himself is quick to point out the absurdity in sentimentalizing the uneducated poet. Such a figure is never natural, but

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[32] O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh*, 23-24.

[33] Seamus Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh: From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*: *A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour, 1975), 108.

[34] Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh," 108.

the product of imitation: "When a country body begins to progress into print he does not write out of his rural innocence—he writes out of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*."[35] Kavanagh knew of what he spoke. He had taught himself to write poetry by emulating the pastoralists and Romantics anthologized in his schoolbooks, especially Wordsworth. These rudimentary encounters with literature were all Kavanagh had, as he explains in the essay "Schoolbook Poetry."[36] He did not have access to the works of the revivalists such as Yeats, Æ (George Russell), Paidraic Colum, and James Stephens until he began to correspond with Æ and, in 1930, began making regular journeys to Dublin. These writers were rarely mentioned during his youth, and had their names ever came through what Kavanagh called "the dense wall of prejudice," they would have just been seen as "a gang of evil men who were out for a destruction of the Catholic Faith." They were certainly not a part of the rural Irish milieu.

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[35] Patrick Kavanagh, "Return in Harvest," qtd. in Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born Again Romantic* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1991), 4-5.

[36] As Kavanagh states, "If roots I had they were in the schoolbooks." Patrick Kavanagh, "Schoolbook Poetry," *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971), 4.

Writes Kavanagh, "No nun or priest would send books of lottery tickets to such men." [37]

The selection of books that Kavanagh lists as his influences is eclectic, containing many American and British. Among these titles are *Locksley Hall*, *Eugene Aram*, Bret Harte's *Dickens in Camp*, *Gil Blas*, *Moby Dick*, and later, *Ulysses*. [38] Thomas D'Arcy McGee's *History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics* (1863), and William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1843) in particular influenced his development of his ideas about the land and the peasant. McGee's *History of Ireland* served the same purpose for Kavanagh that O'Grady's *History of Ireland, the Heroic Period* had served for the revivalists. Namely, it provided him with both a map and a sense of history. Of central importance here, however, is McGee's history of Ireland, which differs from O'Grady's history in several ways. First, McGee's history emphasizes Catholicism rather than Celtic legend. McGee states that "[t]he conversion of pagan people to Christianity must always be a

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[37] Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (1938; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 190. All subsequent in-text citations will be to this edition.

[38] Patrick Kavanagh, *By Night Unstarred: An Autobiographical Novel*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (The Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1977), 9; Patrick Kavanagh, "Studies in the Technique of Poetry: Extracts from 10 Lectures," in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, ed. Peter Kavanagh, 242.

primary fact in their history."[39] In addition, he glosses rapidly over "what the Bards and Storytellers have handed down to us, concerning Ireland before it became Christian" because "we have neither documentary nor monumental evidence" of these "wild and uncertain traditions."[40]

What may be its most striking difference from O'Grady's history, however, is McGee's deliberate placement of Ireland in a specific time and geographical location:

> Ireland is situated in the North Atlantic, between the degrees fifty-one and a half and fifty-five and a half North and five and a quarter and ten and a third West longitude from Greenwich. It is the last land usually seen by ships leaving the Old World, and the first by those which arrive there from Northern parts of America.[41]

McGee describes Ireland as a land between the old and new worlds, both literally and figuratively. It is the last land seen as one leaves Europe, and the first seen as one returns from North America. The geographic meeting place between two worlds, it is a land in transition, both socially and culturally. Despite its state of limbo, however, it remains stable and

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[39] Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A Popular History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics, Vol. I* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier and Co., 1863) 7.

[40] McGee, *A Popular History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics, Vol. I*, 2.

[41] McGee, *A Popular History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics, Vol. I*, 1.

sovereign; to show this, McGee describes the four provinces as the four quarters of a shield on a coat of arms.

It is helpful to keep in mind Seamus Deane's distinction between *territory*, *land*, and *soil* when comparing McGee's depiction of the physical land of Ireland to O'Grady's. According to Deane, *territory* refers to the conception of Ireland as a state, *land* refers to the conception of Ireland as an economy within the civic sphere, and *soil* refers to the cultural reality envisioned by nationalists and not articulated by the other two terms. According to this scheme, Kavanagh's presentation of the land is informed by the distinction between the mythologized *landscape* or *soil* in O'Grady's *History*, and the historically and geographically bounded *land* and *territory* of McGee's *History*. Kavanagh's land does not harbor fairies or Fir Bolgs, but instead bears the physical effects and memories of hard work and disputes over ownership. This idea is the kernel of his poem, "Epic":

> I have lived in important places, times
> When great events were decided, who owned
> That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
> Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.[42]

[42] Patrick Kavanagh, "Epic," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1964), 136.

Like McGee's territory, which is delimited by the shields of the four provinces, Kavanagh's land is marked by hard-won claims.[43] Kavanagh's peasants live in a historically and geographically bounded land; the great events of their history do not involve heroes, but instead small farmers trying to scrape out a living on "half a rood of rock."

Another influential book in Kavanagh's development was William Carleton's *Stories and Traits of the Irish Peasantry*. The revivalists saw Carleton as the true peasant voice, albeit a "stammering" and "illogical" one. By contrast, Kavanagh remembers the more genuine and lasting respect his generation had for Carleton, comparing his verisimilitude to that of a canonical and more controversial writer, James Joyce:

> When I was growing up—and to an extent this is still true—Carleton was popular among the people, for a good many had not been corrupted, and so were happy to look in the mirror that their poet had provided. Carleton holds the mirror up to life here in a way that no other writer of Ireland has done with the possible exception of Joyce…[44]

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[43] Here, *claims* is used in the sense of a tract of land that has been staked out.

[44] Patrick Kavanagh, "Extracts from Ten Lectures Delivered at University College Dublin in 1956 Entitled 'Studies in the Techniques of Poetry,' in *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, 71.

Even in 1956, when Kavanagh gave the lecture from which this passage is excerpted, many Irish still considered Carleton's *Traits* an authentic representation of rural life as it was lived in the early twentieth century.

Kavanagh shares Carleton's dedication to realism, his attention to detail, and his ear for dialect. And, like Carleton, Kavanagh assumed that the poet's duty was to "hold the mirror up to life." But Carleton's goal had been to depict the customs of the Irish peasant in such a way as to satisfy the mid-nineteenth century ethnographical interest in the details of lives of foreign races. [45] In his introduction to *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, Carleton explains that the audience for his book was the Scots and the English, in whom he wanted to instill an understanding of the Irish character. Carleton especially wanted these two groups to recognize the "important and interesting" role of the Irish peasant within the empire.[46] This goal was tinged with a sense of urgency; Carleton believed

[45] Facsimile edition of William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry, Vol. 1* (1843; London: Colin Smythe, Ltd., 1990), 10.

[46] William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry, Vol. 1,* i.

that the culture was waning even as he was trying to reconstitute a representation of it. [47]

For Kavanagh, this traditional Gaelic culture was not waning; it had simply been altered by history. In *The Green Fool*, Kavanagh describes his family's house in Mucker as "a modern dwelling cut off from the Gaelic tradition": "There are no secret nooks where one might find an old prophecy or a forgotten ballad or the heads of old clay pipes" (*GF* 19). But that was not to say that the Gaelic tradition had not been present; it was simply not the iconic tradition of the Celtic Twilight. Rather, Kavanagh's connection to the Gaelic tradition came from unexpected sources. The satiric rhymes of the local ballad maker, the Bard of Callenberg, were about as much as Kavanagh's parish "could stomach" (*GF* 10). However, the people possessed a wealth of lore that even they "didn't know they knew." From their unselfconscious and incidental talk, and not the songs of the Bard, he heard "phrases of whimsical prophecy and exciting twists of language that would delight the heart of a wheelbarrow or a modernist poet" (*GF* 10).

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[47] Barbara Hayley explains in her foreword to the 1990 facsimile edition that the book's sense of immediacy fueled its initial popularity. Barbara Hayley, "Foreword," to William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry, Vol. 1,* 11.

The reality of the Gaelic tradition that did exist in his community was actually much more complicated, altered as it was by the forces of history and modernity and negotiated by the community's perceptions. This is most clearly seen in Kavanagh's description in *The Green Fool* of a night with the Mummers. What is seen by "[t]he old folk in the little houses" as "an old Irish custom" is really more of a hybrid; the tradition appears not only in Great Britain, but also in France, Greece, and countries of Latin America. It is also a tradition that has been altered by history, incorporating not only archetypal and religious figures such as Beelzebub, Saint Patrick and Saint George, but also figures from both the distant (Oliver Cromwell) and more recent past (Daniel O'Connell).

The different reactions the Mummers receive illustrate the schism in cultural perceptions of tradition. The big houses were peopled by the same groups who had brought mummery to Ireland, yet these groups were the same ones who considered Kavanagh and his troupe "hooligans." With its idiosyncratic verses and associated acts of vandalism and looting, the local Irish version of the Mummers' play was seen by the residents of the big houses as a degradation of their purer tradition. According to Henry Glassie, in his study of mummery in a community in

Ulster, contemporary folklorists have a similarly elite view—that there is such a thing as a pure tradition of mummery, and that what was once a solemn ritual to bring fertility and luck into the community has devolved into "mere pageant and pastime." [48]

These contemporary folklorists also consider modern mummery inauthentic because it did not hold on to what Glassie refers to as "Victorian ideas of realism" in which the narrative of the mummer's play should present a clear and classic cycle. This was the fault of the practitioners: "The peasants of the present, [the folklorists] felt, were dull and incapable of understanding their own actions, but the original players were contemplative and logical."[49] The economic aspect of modern mummery also dismayed folklorists, who saw it as a recent degeneration from the agricultural, communal, and barter-based economy of the Middle Ages to the wage labor of modernity.[50]

In fact, the folklorists' desire to find a pure origin had more to do with their own needs than it did the needs or reality of the modern rural

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[48] James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, *Vol. 4*, 3d edition (1907; London: Macmillan, 1955), 214. Cited in Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

[49] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass,* 58.

[50] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass,* 122.

worker. If the origins of mumming were in fertility rites, why is the goal of modern mumming to provide diversion or pastime less important? "For people who work hard, who live together but who are kept apart by personality, faith, and politics, those are neither trivial nor degenerate needs," writes Glassie.[51] In short, mumming made sense in both its original setting ("whatever it was") and its more recent configuration.[52] There remains some ambiguity in Kavanagh's depiction, however; he admits that the big houses might be right in perceiving the Mummers as hooligans. The Mummers do engage in petty theft and vandalism in pursuit of their goal—drinking money. As Kavanagh's portrayal makes clear, though, the generous reception that the Mummers receive at the older peasant houses reflects that this custom, altered as it is, still fulfills a need in the community.

The apparent lack of cohesion of the modern Mummers' play also reflects the increasingly fragmented and hybridized nature of the rural. In his work, Glassie outlines an analogous relationship between the modern Mummers' play as a fragment of a longer, more cohesive work and a religious statue as a fragment of a Cathedral. This analogy works on many

[51] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass,* 135.
[52] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass,* 58.

levels. First, the Mummers' play can be seen as reflecting the fragmented nature of rural life compared to the idealized vision of the mythologized whole. Second, and perhaps more importantly, if we think back to the statue of Our Lady operating as a synecdoche for the whole of the church, then the modern Mummers' play is a practical and personal adaptation of the possibly outdated, alienating, or no longer appropriate mores of a larger tradition. As Glassie states, "Although it is often said that the modern mumming is the detritus of a long realistic drama, it would be better seen as an intensification, a perfection, a streamlining."[53]

Finally, the Mummers' play was a part of community life in that it held clues to the recent past of the community, touched all members equally, and adjusted as the community changed and grew.[54] In Ulster, especially, mumming created a connection to a broader cultural region spreading from Ireland to Scotland, while at the same time reinforcing local identity.[55] In difficult times, mumming functioned to hold a

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[53] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass*, 60.

[54] Mummers traditionally knocked on every door in their community and adapted their play and tactics according to the audience within.

[55] While the Ulster version of the general Mummers' play had elements shared with communities in other parts of Ireland and Scotland, each community's rhymes were distinct. Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass*, 71-72.

fractured community together.[56] In Kavanagh's case, the night of mumming during the Civil War of 1922 brought together the Free Staters and the Republicans of his community, if only for a brief moment.

In his depiction of a night of mumming, then, Kavanagh shows both the complicated nature of tradition and that the Irish peasantry was not, in fact, waning as Carleton had thought, but had been changed by the economic pressures of modernization, capitalism, and state-making.[57] They had not disappeared, but had been, in the words of Clark and Donnelly, "transmogrified both by literary men of genius and by propagandists."[58] Accordingly, the word *peasant* takes on a new meaning in Kavanagh's works. As he explains, a person that the revival would call a peasant would never go by that label himself; instead, he would call himself a farmer, even if he owned only a few acres of land.[59] Accordingly, Kavanagh only uses the word *peasant* in certain situations, giving it a more pointed and metaphoric connotation: "a peasant is all that mass of

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[56] Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass*, 128.

[57] Clark and Donnelly, Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, 11.

[58] Clark and Donnelly, Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, 12.

[59] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 97.

mankind which lives below a certain level of consciousness. They live in the dark cave of the unconscious and they scream when they see the light. They take offense easily, their degree of insultability is very great."[60] In this usage of *peasant*, Kavanagh is more in keeping with the word's etymology. As Martin J. Crohan points out, the word *peasant* comes from the Latin *pagensis*, which means a place clearly delineated by boundaries.[61] Kavanagh's peasant is no longer a quaint figure, but instead a personification of the limits and the absences he sees within the parish.

Until he tried to make his way in the literary community of Dublin, Kavanagh felt that this sort of philistinism was found only in rural areas in which interests were confined to the goings on within the parish. Take, for example, the moment in *The Green Fool* when a neighbor asks Kavanagh for the news from the *Irish Statesman:*

> 'Any stir on the paper?' a fellow asked me.
> 'Plenty,' I replied. 'Gertrude Stein is after writing a new book.'
> 'Quit the coddin.' How's the markets goin'? My sowl, this looks like a bad pit to-day' (194).

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[60] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait* (Dublin: Dolman Press, 1964), 23.

[61] Martin J. Crohan, "…The Great and Good… The Worthless and Insignificant" A Case Study of Thomas O'Crohan's *The Islandman*," in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?*, 177.

Such a narrow focus created petty arguments and disturbances similar to those caused by Kavanagh's first published poem, "An Address to an Old Wooden Gate" (1929) : "Everyone who had an old wooden gate—and that was half of the parish—claimed that it was *their* wooden gate that I had slandered" (*GF* 189). Such petty tempests, not only a mark of the standard definition of parochialism he was moving away, were also the reason for Kavanagh's increasing distance from his community.

In his early belief in the necessity of the poet's isolation from society, Kavanagh was similar to not only the revivalists but also the Romantics and the pastoralists that he emulated in his early days. With the triangulated elements of landscape, peasant, and poet, the revivalists felt they, and Ireland, could transcend or even rewrite history. Kavanagh saw these three things as the formula with which he, as an artist and an individual, could transcend underdevelopment and make a place for himself in literary culture. Thus, he is always at the center of his work as both peasant and poet.

When the poet and the peasant became one in the character of Kavanagh, Seamus Deane argues, one of the things that had marked the best literature of the revival disappeared—the relationship between

author and protagonist. Deane claims that the author-as-protagonist stance deployed by Yeats and Joyce is more "involved" than the protagonist-as-author stance deployed by Kavanagh. In "The Fisherman" for example, Yeats, the author, is also the protagonist, imagining the ideal fisherman that is both the ostensible subject of the poem as well as its audience:

> Maybe a twelvemonth since
> Suddenly I began,
> In scorn of this audience,
> Imagining a man
> And his sun-freckled face,
> And grey Connemara cloth,
> …
> And cried, 'Before I am old
> I shall have written him one
> Poem maybe as cold
> And passionate as the dawn.'[62]

Kavanagh does not use this protagonist-as-author stance for revelation. Instead, in the words of Deane, Kavanagh "emerges as he entered, still insistently himself." [63]

I believe, however, that Kavanagh's stance, if not as "involved" as Joyce's or Yeats, is more complicated and more reflective of his condition

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[62] Yeats, "The Fisherman," 62.
[63] Deane, "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism," 10.

than author-as-protagonist or protagonist-as-author; he is both author and protagonist, as separate, discrete units. Although he is at the center of his works, he is the fool, the peasant, or the outsider poet whose relationship with his surroundings is reflected in the reactions of his fellow peasants to him. In short, Kavanagh is always looking for himself in the presence of others, while simultaneously distancing himself from their community.

This explains why so much of Kavanagh's work is unsatisfying to critics. Since he is always looking for himself in the presence of others, his technique has to be continuously reworked, "as if previous achievements and failures added up to nothing in the way of self- knowledge or self-criticism of his own capabilities as a maker," according to Heaney.[64] And, less kindly, Heaney also says that Kavanagh made "an aesthetic out of self-pity."[65] However, Kavanagh's weaknesses are also what make him so fascinating. His stubborn refusal to embrace mythology, whether it was generated by the revival, Dublin's literary culture, or the Fianna Fáil government, gave him little with which to face down the legacy of underdevelopment. Nonetheless, he tried. Because of this, he can be, as Seamus Deane phrases it, "internally understood in terms of the culture

[64] Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh," 106.
[65] Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh," 116.

that produced him." [66] Kavanagh's reaction to the culture that produced him was to develop his own parochial vision.

Kavanagh's Parochial Vision and Two Early Poems: "Inniskeen Road: July Evening," and "Shancoduff"

Parochialism at its most basic espouses the local, the unscholarly and the day-to-day. Because parochialism is associated with a narrow, limited environment, it is often mistaken for provincialism.[67] In 1952, in his short-lived newspaper *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Kavanagh redefined these two terms, presenting them as opposites:

> The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—towards which his eyes are turned—has to say… The parochial mentality, on the other hand, is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish.[68]

Kavanagh's distinction between parochialism and provincialism is most clearly reflected in language; the provincial uses the language of the metropolis, or the revival to describe his experience, while the true

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[66] Deane, "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism," 10.

[67] Michael Allen, "Provincialism and Recent Irish Poetry: The Importance of Patrick Kavanagh," in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, 23.

[68] Patrick Kavanagh, "Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1:7 (May 24, 1952), 1.

parochial speaks confidently with that "stammering and illogical" and idiosyncratic peasant voice.

Colbert Kearney holds Daniel Corkery's work up as a seminal example of the type of parochialism that Kavanagh later embraced. In its specificity, Corkery's work counteracts not only the forces that undervalue the happenings of the fields, but also the revivalist tendencies to paint Irish life in broad strokes so as to preserve its romantic purity. As Kearney states, Corkery writes about "a *Munster* twilight—as if he were insisting on the local accuracy of his work when contrasted with second-hand romanticism then associated with Dublin's *Celtic* twilight." [69] In this, parochialism privileges lyrical opportunism over the national phantasmagoria of folklore, literary tradition and history.

More importantly, perhaps, provincialism is the legacy of the forces that led to stifled economic and cultural development in post-Rebellion Ireland.[70] These forces were not only those operating from the outside, such as the colonial legacy, but also those operating from within, such as

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[69] Colbert Kearney, "Daniel Corkery: A Priest and His People," in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?*, 204.

[70] This is what Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland*, refers to as "underdevelopment." Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 471.

the educational system that privileged English literature over the Irish. It is this combination of forces that convinces a young Irish writer that, as Corkery puts it, "what happens in his own fields is not stuff for the Muses." Corkery continues, "What happens in the neigbourhood of an Irish boy's home—the fair, the hurling match, the land grabbing, the *priesting*, the mission, the Mass—he never comes on in literature, that is, in such literature as he is told to respect and learn."[71]

Kavanagh turned even further inward than Corkery, however. Having only "abstinence" to express, as did others of his generation, Kavanagh's parochialism did not stop at a specific parish, but delved deeper inward to specific parcels of land and even to one specific person's idiosyncratic view of the world via his parish. In other words, provincialism can be broadly defined as a description of self in the language of the other, and Kavanagh's parochial struggle becomes the elusiveness of authenticity in the presence of others. This struggle can most readily be seen in two poems, "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" (1936) and "Shancoduff" (1937).

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[71] Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Russell & Russell: New York, 1965), 15.

Because of its specificity and its personal concerns, Kavanagh's brand of parochialism flew in the face of the revival's definition of parochialism. According to Yeats, the parochial writer should, out of his love for Ireland, "guard against the bravado that takes the potato patch for the ultimate."[72] Kavanagh breaks this rule boldly in "Inniskeen Road: July Evening":

> I have what every poet hates in spite
> Of all of the solemn talk of contemplation.
> Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight
> Of being king and government and nation.
> A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king
> Of banks and stone and every blooming thing.[73]

Not only does he take the particular, "a road, a mile of kingdom," for the ultimate, he also makes himself, the poet, the center of this world—the king, even. He has no intention of representing Ireland; he is representing himself.

By referencing Alexander Selkirk's "plight," Kavanagh calls attention to his own burdensome obligation to express a culture that, as Kiberd has pointed out, provides not only little to express, but even less

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[72] Michael Allen, "Provincialism and Recent Irish Poetry: The Importance of Patrick Kavanagh," 36.

[73] Patrick Kavanagh, "Inniskeen Road: July Evening," in *Ploughman and Other Poems* (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1936), 30.

with which to express it. In *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery states that "the Irishman who would write his own people has to begin by trying to forget what he has learnt."[74] But "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" shows that Kavanagh is not ready to dismiss "what he has learnt." Accordingly, he chooses to compare his singular solitude not to an Irish figure, but to an English one—Alexander Selkirk, the basis for Dafoe's character, Robinson Crusoe, and the subject of William Cowper's poem, "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk." Kavanagh would have read Cowper's poem in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury,* the book to which he credits his knowledge of poetry. That he chooses to compare his situation to Selkirk, rather than Robinson Crusoe, might also be a declaration of his own authenticity. In Cowper's poem, Selkirk bemoans his solitude, stating, "Better to dwell in the midst of alarms/ Than reign in this horrible place."[75] Kavanagh, however, stubbornly embraces the legacy of underdevelopment and makes for himself a literary opportunity—a

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[74] Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, 15.

[75] William Cowper, "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk," *The Golden Treasury*, ed. Francis T. Palgrave, 1875; available at http://www.bartleby.com/106/160.html; Internet; accessed 21 November 2004.

chance to, in fact, become king of "every blooming thing," with both the vernal and pejorative meanings intended.[76]

"Inniskeen Road: July Evening" also introduces the three key elements of Kavanagh's parochialism, the landscape, the peasant, and the poet. In Kavanagh's poem, the poet shares the landscape of the road with the shadows and fleeting presence of his fellow peasants, but he is alone in his recognition of the narrow boundaries that define this "kingdom." This composition prefigures much of what is to come in Kavanagh's poetry and prose: the poet is both a part of his community, yet is alienated from it by his unique vision of the landscape. He is brought into existence by the presence of others, but they also only serve to highlight his separation from them.

Seamus Heaney describes "Inniskeen Road" and others of Kavanagh's much-anthologized early poems as "matter-of-fact landscapes" that become a "prospect of the mind."[77] "Shancoduff,"

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[76] This last line reveals an ambivalence evident in much of Kavanagh's work; he yearns to join in with this carefree crowd, but he has chosen to be a lonely castaway for poetry's sake … or has he? As Quinn points out, Kavanagh would have happily joined the 'twos and three' on their way to the dance "if he could have afforded the fourpence admission price." (Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 63).

[77] Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh," 109.

published in 1937 in *Dublin Magazine*, is another poem that perhaps provides an even deeper example of the workings of Kavanagh's parochialism. In "Shancoduff" we see the moment in which the land, the peasant, and the poet all come together to depict not only a rural landscape that defies romanticization, but also the difficulty of being a "working" writer—in Kavanagh's case, a writer who has one foot in the soil and another in the literary circles of Dublin.[78]

The title "Shancoduff" immediately brings to mind questions of translation and reclamation. Shancoduff is the anglicized version of the Gaelic *Shanco dubh*.[79] Kavanagh's choice in using the anglicized spelling both acknowledges the contested history of the land and resists the revival fascination with Gaelic place names. Some of this resistance is due in part to Kavanagh's own lack of fluency in the Irish language; because he left school before compulsory language education took effect, he is of a generation for whom Gaelic was practically a foreign language. Perhaps

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[78] These early poems were written while Kavanagh lived in Inniskeen and continued to farm and cobble.

[79] An earlier version, prior to publication in the *Dublin Magazine*, was titled "Shanco Dubh." When Kavanagh submitted a later version of the poem to Cuala Press in 1941, he titled it "Black Shanco." When it appeared in the 1957 P.E.N. anthology and *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* (1961), the poem was again titled "Shancoduff."

more significantly, the anglicized name also ensures that the land will not become a metaphor for a nationalist myth.

As the whitewashed statue of Our Lady was altered by history then returned to her original use, Shancoduff, despite its history, is a "working" farm. Instead of looking for presences of the past and making the land into a museum piece as a nationalist poet might do, Kavanagh instead focuses on the practical effects of change. A comparison can be made to Kavanagh's poem "Gold Watch" from *Ploughman and Other Poems*. The poem describes a watch, the case of which depicts an idyllic rural scene:

> Engraved on the case
> House and mountain
> And a far mist
> Rising from a faery fountain

However, the case is only a façade for the somewhat prosaic inner mechanism of the watch, which has its own history of alteration and endurance:

> Dates of repairs
> 1914 M.Y., 1918 H.J.,
> She has had her own cares [80]

[80] Patrick Kavanagh, "Gold Watch," *Ploughman and Other Poems,* 19.

Similarly, the land in "Shancoduff" serves not as a metaphor for the spiritual continuity of the Irish race, as a revival presentation of landscape might have led readers to expect, but as evidence of the "cares" of the province and the people who live there.

"Shancoduff" blends agricultural realism with an unobtrusively Catholic ethos.[81] The land of Shancoduff is bound by Catholicism and fairly recent history—the decline of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, the partition of the north, and the changes that modernization has made in the social and economic structures of the parish. However, the hills of Shancoduff look "eternally … north towards Armagh,"[82] and never to the past:

> Lot's wife would not be salt if she had been
> Incurious as my black hills that are happy
> When dawn whitens Glassdrummond chapel.

Because of their refusal to engage in historical reflection, the hills are also resistant to being populated by the fairy lore and legends that populate nationalist landscapes such as O'Grady's "Map of Ireland in Heroic Times." Instead, when these hills are personified, they are not giants and

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[81] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 50.

[82] Patrick Kavanagh, "Shancoduff," *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1964) Subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

Fir Bolgs, but "incurious" peasants, whose "rushy beards" are fondled by the winds. They also "hoard the bright shillings of March," engaging in the material acquisitiveness that the revivalists felt was a spiritually damaging influence of modernization.

Despite the prevalence of folklore and peasant subjects in its works, the revival provided no realist Irish models to spur Kavanagh into using the actualities of farm life for his poetic themes or images; the peasant in revival works was too busy serving as a spiritual model to do any actual labor.[83] Nicholas Grene claims that workers are not involved with the land as a *vista* to be described and appreciated in aesthetic terms; instead, they tend to be indifferent to this effect of the landscape.[84] Kavanagh sees this tendency in his fellow farmers and feels alienated by their inability to see the land the way he does. As a member of a more affluent rural class, however, Kavanagh had the luxury of thinking abstractly about the land.

By his own admission, Kavanagh was a middle-class peasant: "My father, being a shoemaker, was probably less poor than the small farmer classes. What was called the 'dropping shilling' kept coming in. But as for

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[83] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 41.

[84] Nicholas Grene, "The Landscape of Ireland," in *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 16; qtd. in Fleming, *"A man who does not exist,"* 48.

the *scraidíns* of farmers with their watery little hills that would physic a snipe, I don't know where they got any money."[85] The luxury afforded by the land, his father's cobbling, and his sister's jobs created some distance between himself and what should have been a significant part of his audience—his fellow peasants. The difference between Kavanagh and the members of the community is shown in the language used in "Shancoduff" as well. Kavanagh speaks in two voices, one "colloquio-poetic," in which he adopts the idiom of ordinary speech in such a way as to incorporate figurative language without strain. The other is "colloquio-realist," in which he mimics Monaghan dialect. The drovers speak in the Monaghan dialect, but the narrator, the farmer-poet, speaks as an idiosyncratic individual, and not as a representative peasant.[86]

Amongst this group are the cattle-drovers who are sheltering near Shancoduff and are not interested in poetry or mythology, but instead in the condition and provenance of the land:

> 'Who owns them hungry hills
> That the water-hen and snipe must have forsaken?
> A poet? Then by heavens he must be poor'

[85] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self Portrait*, 10.
[86] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 48.

The drovers' comments also provide a sense of the conflicts that arose as many groups with different interests in the land tried to eke out a living in these "hungry hills." The drover, for example, is a hybrid creature in the peasant classes. He was not only a rural laborer, a victim of the same economic conditions that sent young men to the degrading hiring fair, but he was also connected to the graziers and ranchers of the cattle industry. The cattle industry was seen as the root of all of the social and economic woes of the peasant,[87] and graziers and ranchers were historically reviled as props of the landlord system.[88] In the farmer's mind, the grazier saw land as merely something that could be put to use to make money, and because he lacked any sense of ancestral or customary ties to the land, the grazier's economic behavior was less likely to be dictated by local tradition.[89] The rancor felt towards members of the cattle industry is

[87] David S. Jones, "The Cleavage between Graziers and Peasants in the Land Struggle, 1890-1910," in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Clark and Donnelly, 382.

[88] Graziers were tied to the clearances of the nineteenth century. Jones, "The Cleavage between Graziers and Peasants in the Land Struggle, 1890-1910," 393.

[89] Jones, "The Cleavage between Graziers and Peasants in the Land Struggle, 1890-1910," 378.

presented much more acutely in an earlier version of the poem in which "cattle-smugglers" rather than drovers find shelter nearby.[90]

It is also notable that the action of the poem takes place "In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage." Rocksavage Forth is an old Celtic fort that is named for the Rocksavage estate, which lies behind it. At first glance, this act of re-naming seems to imply an Anglo-Irish appropriation of the ancient fort. In Kavanagh's works, the two have become one, and in this hybrid state play an important role the community. Rocksavage estate figures prominently in *The Green Fool*, as its ruin benefits the local peasants; its land was sold at conacre and its trees were cut down and sold as firewood. Rocksavage estate also is the site in which the more mercenary and less-than-heroic qualities of the peasant are played out. Kavanagh notes the regular lootings the estate endured: "There was no love for beauty. We were barbarians just emerged from the Penal days. The hunger had killed our poetry and we were mere animals grabbing at the leavings of the dogs of war" (*GF* 63).

In this landscape where the hills resist history and mythology, the peasants are a disparate and increasingly nontraditional lot, and the ruins

[90] Patrick Kavanagh, "Shanco Dubh," reprinted in Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 470.

of the Anglo-Irish big house Rocksavage stand witness, what is the role of the poet? The resident peasant poet, Kavanagh himself, is gently self-mocking about the small scale and boundaried nature of his own experiences when he tries to apply the language of the epic to his actions within this landscape: "They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn/ With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves." Even though the tone is self-mocking, Kavanagh's aesthetic perception of the land creates dissonance between the poet and his fellow peasants.

The last line of the poem ("I hear, and is my heart not badly shaken?") exposes the tension that is the result of the farmer and the poet being one. Not able to make it as a farmer, he is somewhat of an outcast, and as a poet, he has become redundant. In sum, these lines point also to the writer's necessary isolation from the rest of society. But whether Kavanagh is truly saddened by this remains unclear. In the end, the drover's comments have articulated for him his attachment, both as a poet and as a farmer, to his own land.

For most of the 1930s, Kavanagh avoided making the realities of farm life his subject matter, choosing instead to focus on more spiritual ideas. The later and best known version of "Shancoduff" signals a change

from this, especially when we look at the third stanza from the earlier "Shanco Dubh":

> My hills have never seen the sun rising,
> With the faith of an illiterate peasant they await
> The Final Resurrection when all hills
> Will face the East.[91]

This stanza is not only a relic of the more spiritual and traditionally Catholic tone of Kavanagh's early poems, but with its reference to the "illiterate peasant" it embraces the revival representation of the peasant. In removing this stanza, Kavanagh focused the poem more on his place within the rural milieu—his relationship to the land, the people, and his art as represented through others. In this change, the poem shifts from descriptive or symbolic verse to something more self-creating, in which Kavanagh uses others to distinguish the self.[92]

Kavanagh would return to "Shancoduff" and "Inniskeen Road, July Evening" again and again as two of his favorite works. Perhaps not coincidentally, these two poems forecast the future trajectory of his growth as a writer. As I show in the next chapter, "Shancoduff," in its lack of sentimentality and presentation of actualities of rural life (including the

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[91] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 47.
[92] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 50.

tensions and doubt within the community itself), is a precursor to Kavanagh's great post-revival "peasant" poem, *The Great Hunger*. "Inniskeen Road: July Evening," in its detached and softly comedic approach to autobiography, builds a bridge to *Tarry Flynn*. In each of these later works, Kavanagh further develops his final understanding of not only parochialism but also his identity as an artist.

Chapter 2

Patrick Kavanagh and the Perils of the Peasant Poet

"Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy, not fully born."[1]

The publication of *Ploughman and Other Poems* in 1936 established Kavanagh as a peasant poet, a role he would assume throughout the 1930s. The poems within the collection presented a conundrum, however: what *kind* of peasant poet was Kavanagh? Was he a peasant-turned-poet whose emergence into literacy devalued his rural experiences? Or, was he a peasant poet who would write an authentic depiction of his people and his land, using the rural milieu as his muse? Despite the rural flavor of the collection's name, the bulk of the poems in *Ploughman and Other Poems* support the former possibility. The poems in this collection tend to be less about the details of rural life and more about the alchemy of turning the

[1] Patrick Kavanagh, "Author's Notes," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1964), xiv.

dross of experience into a poetry of rapture, as seen in the poem "Ploughman":

> I find a star-lovely art
> In a dark sod
> Joy that is timeless! O heart
> That knows God.

Even though this poem and many others in the collection deal specifically with rural subjects, they lack agricultural realism. As Antoinette Quinn points out, any of them could have been written by "an armchair pastoralist" rather than a writer who had actually worked the soil as a profession.[2]

Several poems in*Ploughman* such as "Inniskeen Road: July Evening," as well as other poems that Kavanagh wrote between 1936 and 1937 including "Shancoduff," point to a significant new direction—the conscious adoption of the role of peasant spokesman. Kavanagh's work during this period occasionally a socialist tone, catching the attention of Synge and Leslie Daiken, a socialist journalist and poet. The recognition of fellow writers such as these ignited a flicker of a social conscience in

[2] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born Again Romantic* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1991), 32.

Kavanagh. These early stirrings of social conscience ultimately led to Kavanagh's best-known work, *The Great Hunger*, published in 1942.[3]

For the time being, however, Kavanagh was concerned more with selling his work than with social commentary or even the authentic representation of rural life.[4] The publication of *Ploughman* in 1936 led Kavanagh to try his literary hand in London. And just as he had exaggerated the persona of "peasant poet" on his first visit to Dublin in order to court Æ, he now played the romantic role of the starving artist to attract the sympathies of London publishers. [5] Kavanagh eventually caught the attention of Helen Wadell, a reader for Constable and a fellow writer who saw in Kavanagh's eloquence and rural upbringing the possibility that he could be an "informer" for their shared home, Ulster. She felt that Kavanagh did not need to be cast strictly as a poet, however, and arranged for him to receive a commission from Constable to write an

[3] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 88.

[4] Kavanagh tended to market any verse with specifically Irish content or place names to Irish journals and to send more neutral material to English editors. Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 37.

[5] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 116.

autobiography that would later be published as *The Green Fool*.[6] The commission was designed to benefit both parties. Kavanagh would be able to survive a while longer in London, and Constable might cash in on the instant critical and commercial success recently achieved by "peasant" autobiographies such as Tomás O'Crohán's *The Islandman* (1929).

The publisher clearly hoped to exploit the authenticity of Kavanagh's story, expecting the book to be both autobiography and social anthropology. The blurb on the original dust-jacket sums up the publisher's promotional strategy, inviting readers to compare Kavanagh's stance to that of the revivalist ethnographer: "The life of the community is made as vivid as the life of the person through whose eyes it is presented."[7] However, *The Green Fool* lacks any real introspection on Kavanagh's development as an artist. To read *The Green Fool* as a portrait of an artist is to read an autodidact's tale; Kavanagh's inspiration comes not from his own experiences, but from bookish influences and poetic imitation.

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[6] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 52. In the end, Constable did not pick up the book; Kavanagh had to revise it again before finding a publisher.

[7] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 95.

Nevertheless, the book remains interesting for what it reveals about Kavanagh's ambivalence towards the land, the rural community where he was raised, and how he should represent these things in his work. Not only does the book contain numerous inaccuracies about Kavanagh's rural upbringing, it also has no clear identity because Kavanagh himself was not sure what kind of writer he wanted to be. In this sense, *The Green Fool* is truly a portrait of the artist, unsure of his own voice and searching for commercial success.

Kavanagh later acknowledged the inaccuracies, condemning the book as "a stage-Irish lie" written "under the evil aegis of the so-called Irish literary movement."[8] Perhaps as a result, critics have mistakenly dismissed *The Green Fool* as a failure—as a flawed and false autobiography. In fact, *The Green Fool* offers crucial insight into Kavanagh's development. Indeed, it represents the missing link between the early parochial poems such as "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" and "Shancoduff" and Kavanagh's later works. In what follows, I argue that *The Green* Fool is a crucible for Kavanagh's experimentation with ideas that would be more successfully forged in *The Great Hunger* and *Tarry*

[8] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait* (Dublin: Dolman Press, 1964), 8.

Flynn, the works in which he makes the transition from social relevance and authenticity to comic detachment and, finally, what he defined as true parochialism.

***The Green Fool* (1938)**

The multiple personalities of *The Green Fool* can be traced through the many name changes the novel underwent before publication. One of the earliest titles of the book was *The Grey Dawn Was Breaking*, a reference to a line from a popular sentimental song, "Kathleen, Mavoureen." The song itself is about exile and longing:

> Mavourneen, mavourneen, my sad tears are falling,
> To think that from Erin and thee I must part!
> It may be for years, and it may be forever,
> Then why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart?

Kavanagh reiterated this title in the last sentence of an earlier version of the book in order to show his shift from apprentice poet to real poet, a shift that necessitated exile: "The gray dawn has broken and it will soon be noon."[9] However, Kavanagh ultimately changed the last few sentences in the final published work, as he portrays himself as returning from exile

[9] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 81.

in London to Ireland, "green, and chaste, and foolish."[10] Although he is referring to Ireland in this description, he could very well be describing himself.

The subsequent two titles were more in keeping with this final ambiguous sentence. The first was *The Iron Fool*, which followed by the published title, *The Green Fool*. Both phrases mean essentially the same thing: someone who pretends to be foolish or naïve in order to reap some benefit. Both phrases are similar in meaning to "putting on the poor mouth," or presenting oneself as much more unfortunate than one really is in order to gain either sympathy, or, more preferable, a handout. The decision to change the type of fool from *Iron* to *Green* was, on the one hand, a marketing decision. "Iron fool" was a phrase particular not only to Ireland, but specifically to County Monaghan.[11] The phrase "green fool" on the other hand, was more generally accessible to an audience outside of Ireland. Green calls to mind not only youthful tenderness, but also pastoral beauty, and, more specifically, the green of Ireland.

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[10] Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (United Kingdom: Penguin, 1971), 264. All subsequent in-text citations are made to this edition.

[11] Patrick S Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla*, 1927. Cited by Ciarán Ó Duibhín, Foclóir *Oirthear Uladh: Consolidated Glossary of East Ulster Gaelic*. Available from: http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/~oduibhin/eufocloir.doc; Internet; accessed 23 November 2004.

Perhaps most significantly, however, "green fool" indicates Kavanagh's awareness that he has played a variety of roles throughout his life, and that his memoir is something of a "stage-Irish lie." After all, someone who is described as a "green fool" is only pretending to be foolish. Throughout *The Green Fool,* Kavanagh describes how he played the rustic, the rebel, and finally, the fool, to win favor both within and outside of his community. In order to fit in at the hiring fair, for example, the young Kavanagh constructs a fake bundle to carry so that he will "look the part" of a specific type of rustic, "an Irish emigrant making for Cobh" (110-111).[12] Later, playing another kind of rustic helps him gain notoriety as a poet in urban Dublin and London. Kavanagh describes how he plays up the peasant role on his first meeting with Æ, showing his self-consciousness about the role in his desire to make his presentation more dramatic: "I regretted not having a fiddle under my arm to add a touch of wild colour to my drab tramp" (228). The truth is much less picturesque, however. Kavanagh explains that his concern about the impression that he

[12] In writing about his trip to the hiring fair, Kavanagh sacrifices biographical truth to sociological documentation. According to his brother Peter, Patrick never "went out for hire." Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper* (Ireland: The Curragh, 1979), 42, 65.

was making had more to do with his physical hunger than his passion for poetry.

Kavanagh also describes how, for a short while, he took on the role of rebel, "fighting" in the Civil War on the side of the IRA. The political fervor infecting the parish youths had more to do with "the monotony of peace" (129) rather than any real political conviction, however. Kavanagh himself joins in order to interact with other youths, and, as he says, he "got a kick out of it." Kavanagh also tells how he again assumed a rebel persona in London, claiming to have been involved in the explosion of the George II statue in St. Stephen's Green. The goal of his charade was to make a bit of money, but it turned out to have a benefit similar to his youthful activities in that it garnered the respect of his peer group: "The boys in the --- office … looked at me, and I knew they thought me a two-gun Pat in the flesh, and they wouldn't think twice of getting my autograph" (261-262).

In Kavanagh's depiction of his rural upbringing, however, the role he most consistently assigns himself is that of the fool. Unlike the rustic and the rebel, this role was not chosen by Kavanagh as much as it was conferred upon him by his community. As Kavanagh explains, Patrick's

practical neighbors had no need for another poet, the anachronistic Bard of Callenberg having already ruined them for poetry, "but a fool, yes they could be doing with one of these" (10). Kavanagh describes himself as the natural choice for this role because he, by his own admission, "grew up not exactly 'like another.'"

In this moment, we see the Kavanagh the writer separate from Kavanagh the character. By portraying his younger self as a fool, Kavanagh the writer accrues certain benefits in the present. First, it justified his tendency to romanticize his innate feelings of alienation. Presenting his youthful self as a fool suggests that he was marked in some special way; it made him "into something unusual, a saint or a poet or an imbecile" (10). Second, the role provided him an intellectual escape from the rural milieu, allowing him to compare himself to a literary figure with a more cosmopolitan provenance and reputation—in this case, Dostoevsky's "idiot" (10).

Third, the fool's assumed naïveté often allowed the writer Kavanagh to get away with voicing certain troubling truths. This power had to be wielded with great delicacy, however, and Kavanagh consciously withheld some negative representations as a note in his

preparatory jottings for *The Green Fool* indicates: "A man who writes a book libeling his own people is burning his bed. The fragments cannot be put back together again."[13] He had possibly learned this discretion by witnessing the Irish public's reaction to Brinsley MacNamara's 1918 novel, *Valley of the Squinting Windows*. Believing that MacNamara's attempts to "[hold] the mirror up truthfully" had libeled them, the people of his home community of Devlin burned the book, expelled MacNamara, and waged a campaign to destroy his schoolteacher father's career.[14]

Journal entries from as far back as 1927 reveal Kavanagh's interest in the power of the fool's role: "When we are most foolish then is the time to study our real selves. … I write thus because I have played the seer and been made a fool of by those whom I considered fools."[15] This ability to engage in rigorous introspection and self-admonition, which Kavanagh later saw as the most important advantage of the role of the fool, is achieved in *Tarry Flynn.* In *The Green Fool*, by contrast, introspection is

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[13] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 99.

[14] Benedict Kiely and Peadar O'Donnell, "Foreword" to Brinsley MacNamara, *Valley of the Squinting Windows*, (Tralee: Anvil, 1964), 7-8. Despite his familiarity with this cautionary tale, Kavanagh was still not delicate enough. An episode in which he mistakes Oliver St. John Gogarty's maid for the mistress led to a libel suit that killed *The Green Fool* the moment it hit the shelves.

[15] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 101.

sacrificed to fulfill the expectations of the market. For example, Kavanagh's description of the origin of his poem "Ploughman," in which he attempts to change the actualities of a farmer's life into a "star-lovely art," seems designed to illustrate the discrepancies rather than the serendipities between actual circumstances of life and ingredients of art: "I could not help smiling when I thought of the origin of my ploughman ecstasy. A kicking mare in a rusty old plough tilling a rood of land for turnips."[16] In this description, Kavanagh not only downplays the value of experience, but also expresses mild astonishment that this humble moment held poetic possibility.

The dual nature of *The Green Fool*—autobiography on the one hand and social anthropology on the other—is also to blame for Kavanagh's lack of authentic insight. Not sure of what the book was supposed to be, Kavanagh was not sure what voice, that of peasant informer or comic realist, he was supposed to present. In addition, he sensed problems in trying to write a book that was both authentic *and* marketable. The marketable version of *The Green Fool*, a quaint picture of country folk written for readers who sought the "quick returns of the picturesque and

[16] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 36.

the obvious," initially won out.[17] The logistics of his current situation, living in London while writing about Inniskeen, led Kavanagh to rely on nostalgia, which softened his depictions of what Quinn describes as "a way of life he had frequently griped about while it was actually occurring."[18] This is certainly the case with his depictions of his neighbors as well; elsewhere he admits that only through nostalgia could he represent them with such fondness: "[t]he keynote of simple folk is bad manners, familiarity. They intrude on one's private soul. The only tolerable simple people are those we have manufactured in our evocative memories."[19]

When nostalgia failed, Kavanagh relied on other sources, primarily other well-known depictions of Irish rural life. Even the happy-go-lucky narrative voice is modeled from Carleton's *Autobiography* and *Traits*. At this time, a new rural model had yet to emerge, so the revival representation was the ideal that Kavanagh used to measure life in

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[17] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 96.

[18] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 98.

[19] Patrick Kavanagh, "Some Evocations of No Importance," *Envoy* July 1951, 22-7. *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003) 62.

Inniskeen.[20] Kavanagh subverts quite a few of these revival tropes, however, showing how even those who live in the rural milieu resort to source material to express their experiences in the way their audience expects. The revivalist obsession with recording folklore is neatly turned on its head, for example, when a local farmer tells the poet stories of old Ireland quoted verbatim from Father Burke's *Lectures and Sermons*. Similarly, the young Kavanagh draws upon "stories of the roads out of the books of Patrick Magil and Jim Tully" (238) when he tells his friends and family about his first journey to Dublin. [21]

Kavanagh's representation of his neighbor's foibles also challenges revival stereotypes, especially regarding tradition and the agrarian connection to rebellion and militant nationalism. Kavanagh explains that boredom fueled his IRA career cutting telegraph wires, thus inviting comparison to other local acts of hooliganism described in *The Green Fool*,

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[20] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic,* 69.

[21] I believe "Patrick Magil" is actually Patrick MacGill, referred to as the "voice of the underprivileged." In the 1920s, MacGill wrote autobiographical novels, such as *The Children of the Dead End* and *The Rat Pit,* in which he describes his travels from Ireland to Scotland in hopes of escaping poverty. Jim Tully was an Irish-American writer who wrote hard-boiled fiction about life on the road. He also wrote about the reminiscences of his Irish relatives. A line from one of these works, *Shanty Irish,* is very similar to Kavanagh's depiction of his own community: ""What a bunch of liars an' brigands we Irish are. We'd cut the Pope's throat for a nickel an' burn 'im in hell for a dime." Jim Tully, *Shanty Irish* (NY: Albert & Charles Boni, 1928).

including robberies and the vandalism perpetrated by the Mummers. Kavanagh makes it clear that these actions have their source not in heroism but in economic necessity. Train robbery was "a common thing whenever a housewife ran short of tea, flour or any other necessity of the kitchen." She would call for her husband to get his old gun (ostensibly a relic from agrarian uprisings) while she procured a red petticoat (a feature of a traditional Gaelic costume) and they would hold up a train. When the trains would not stop, Kavanagh continues, people in the community would engage in other forms of robbery or "stunts" as he calls them; "it was the normal business of the country" (135).

Authenticity and comedy do not often work well together, and at many points in the memoir, Kavanagh chose the latter over the former. Even in 1937, Quinn asserts, Kavanagh must have considered writing a "less benign" text, but comedy "prompted him to look the other way."[22] Consequently, the fundamental personality of *The Green Fool* is that of comic realism. In this, Kavanagh is like George Moore, who suggested that he had a kind of dual personality, one writing tragedy while the other

[22] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic.* 74.

lived comic drama.[23] Even though Kavanagh did not aim for the more accurate and "less benign" possibilities to be found in his subject matter, the composition history of *The Green Fool* shows an awareness of the drab and tragic events that were both common to rural life and contrary to the mostly cheerful rural tableaux.[24] In several instances, Kavanagh depicts his neighbors in a style more in keeping with his earlier assertion that they "intrude on one's private soul." One suppressed tale in particular foreshadows the subject matter of *The Great Hunger;* a fifty-year old bachelor is punished by the community for falling in love and thereby threatening the stability of the family home.[25]

Though Kavanagh later dismissed *The Green Fool* as a stage-Irish lie, the book's initial critical reception praised it for breaking with revival conventions. Reviews of *The Green Fool* in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* dubbed Kavanagh a new Robert Burns and found the book a refreshing change from "the customary 'Celtic crooning.'" Austin Clarke

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[23] John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh: A Reappraisal," *Mosaic*, 12:3 (1979), 119; accessed through *PCI Fulltext*, 20 November 2004.

[24] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic,* 84.

[25] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 74.

also remarked on the difference between the characters in *The Green Fool* and the "poetic peasants" of the early days of the literary revival.[26]

The Green Fool is not as anti-revival in spirit and conception as *The Great Hunger* and *Tarry Flynn*. Nevertheless, *The Green Fool* clearly represents a transitional step between Kavanagh's early poetry and those later works, particularly in its exploration of his relationship as an artist to his locality. First, Kavanagh establishes that his narrow, rural community is important on its own right; Inniskeen is in the foreground of the narrative rather than the background.[27] Second, and perhaps more important, in *The Green Fool* Kavanagh recognizes that his central subject is the problem of the poet's relation to his land and milieu. At first, Kavanagh feels as George Moore did in *Hail and Farewell* that he has to leave Ireland in order to write more effectively about it; "Ireland was a fine place to daydream in, but London was a great materialist city where my dreams might crystallize into something more enduring than a winning smile on the face of an Irish colleen—or landscape" (*GF* 252). Kavanagh suggests that he would have liked to break free of the hackneyed Irish model of writing about colleens and landscape, and that

[26] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 110.
[27] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 78.

he might only be able to do that from a more cosmopolitan location. Of course, Kavanagh also reveals his desire for the more "enduring" rewards, such as the monetary success and literary notoriety that he would be more likely to garner in the "materialist" city.

Kavanagh's decision in *The Green Fool* to return to Ireland, "green and chaste and foolish" hints at his later understanding of the difference between the provincial who does not trust his own impressions[28] and the parochial who knows the value of his own experience: "And when I wandered over my own hills and talked again to my own people I looked into the heart of this life and saw that it was good" (262). This expression of the joy of return, marked as it is by the nostalgia that comes with exile, lacks the anxiety that Kavanagh would associate with being rooted in a particular place. Nevertheless, the passage—like *The Green Fool*, more generally—offers insight into the poetic subjects and crises that would be central to Kavanagh's later career.

***The Great Hunger* (1943)**

[28] Patrick Kavanagh, "Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1:7 (May 24, 1952), 1.

In December of 1939, Kavanagh told Harold MacMillan that in his next book he intended to look "philosophically and objectively" at the country he knew.[29] This desire revealed the influence that Sean O'Faolain, Peader O'Donnell, and the other writers of *The Bell* were having on Kavanagh. Under their tutelage, Kavanagh toiled to become an artist who could not only document but also analyze and interpret his society. The process of developing a socio-realist voice was difficult; despite his best efforts to stifle it, the cheerful and the nostalgic tone of *The Green Fool* kept coming through.[30]

An example of one of his failed attempts at developing and sustaining a socio-realist voice is the unfinished poem "Why Sorrow?" which tells the story of Father Mat, a priest who is torn between his Catholicism, his service to his poor rural parish, and his muse. In the scenes that depict what Father Mat must reject in order to be true to himself, both the narrator and Father Mat tellingly reveal both their affection for and understanding of their rural community. In the end, Father Mat chooses the duties of priesthood over poetry. Although Kavanagh never completed or published "Why Sorrow?" pieces of the

[29] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 168.
[30] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 169.

poem made their way into *Tarry Flynn,* and the celibate, outwardly successful but inwardly tormented character of Father Mat became the primary model for Patrick Maguire, the central figure of Kavanagh's epic, *The Great Hunger*.

Despite its slow entry into the public consciousness, *The Great Hunger* was considered by critics to be the poem Ireland had been waiting for. Kavanagh had composed a timely invective against the revivalist view of the Irish countryside, which had been parlayed by de Valera and the Fianna Fáil party into a national myth that was both anachronistic and destructive.[31] Because the poem expresses the "dark injustices" of the land,[32] Edna Longley calls *The Great Hunger* "a national counter epic."[33] I would suggest, however, that Longley's description is not quite accurate. First, to label something as "national" is to presuppose a hegemony similar to that promoted by the revivalists and the Fianna Fáil party. A national myth assumes that poets, politicians, and agricultural workers all share the same understanding of the land and its mythology. Second, *The*

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[31] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 107.

[32] John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh: A Reappraisal," 146.

[33] Edna Longley, *The Living Stream*: *Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), 204.

Great Hunger is not an epic but a collection of lyric passages that maintain cohesion only for the duration of the poem, only to collapse at the end into clay. Very literally, Kavanagh's epic collapses into mock epic as the certainties of Irish mythology, landscape, and even poetic structure fall like a lonely bachelor's bed posts.

It is perhaps more accurate and more productive to describe the poem as a "parochial" counter epic. Augustin Martin argues that, in composing the poem, Kavanagh substituted "the modality of fiction" for "the modality of myth": "Whereas myth deals in the archetypal, fiction cultivates the personal; myth celebrates what was and ever will be, fiction insists upon what is in the here and now; myth strikes at the general, the universal, fiction at the particular, the immediate."[34] The characteristics of fiction that Martin identifies—the personal, the here and now, the particular and immediate—are the key features of Kavanagh's parochialism. The desire for sentimentality and mythology was anathema to Kavanagh; he agreed with Beckett's assertion in "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934) that the old-world certainties of Gaelic heroes held interest for

[34] Augustine Martin, "The Apocalypse of Clay: Technique and Vision in *The Great Hunger*," in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1986), 283.

"none but the academic."[35] Instead, Kavanagh's representation emphasizes a naturalistic and idiosyncratic rural world, at the center of which is the old peasant, Maguire.

Maguire is neither rambunctious playboy-hero nor poetic sage, both stock characters one might encounter in a revival drama or a Wordsworthian ballad. Indeed, he is not even a peasant, but a subsistence farmer—drab, conformist, and passive. The trials he endures are also not heroic in scale, but the "weak, washy way of true tragedy." Kavanagh's original title for the poem, *The Old Peasant*, more clearly mocked not only the archetypes usually presented in the national epic, but also the literary idea, or picturesque conventions of the revivalists' depiction of the peasant. The title, *The Great Hunger,* clearly represents the mock-epic feel of the poem by ironically suggesting that the events represented are of great import and influence. By using the structure of the epic to create a hero out of a lowly farmer, Kavanagh questions not only the revivalists' attempts at apotheosis, but also how such myth-making actually denies the more compelling reality and immediacy of rural life. As a character, Maguire not only flaunts the tradition of the archetypal hero who

[35] Qtd. in Declan Kiberd, "Underdeveloped Comedy: Patrick Kavanagh," in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 592.

represents ideal national characteristics rather than individual traits, he also embodies the "passive suffering" that Yeats claims "is not a theme for poetry." [36]

By writing about Maguire in the third person, Kavanagh also takes a dig at revival ethnography. Unlike *The Green Fool*, *The Great Hunger* has two distinct characters: Maguire and a narrative voice who serves as an interpreter and spokesperson for him.[37] The distance between the two characters, and their distance again from Kavanagh the author, is signaled by the narrator's use of the word *peasant* rather than *farmer* to describe Maguire and other members of his community. As Kavanagh would later write in *Self-Portrait* (1964), a farmer or rural laborer would never call him or herself a peasant. The peasantry, he continues, is "all that mass of mankind which lives below a certain level of consciousness." [38] Kavanagh's use of the word *peasant* also signals literary distance from his subject, similar to that of Synge in his cashel on the Aran Islands. From

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[36] W. B. Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Qtd. in Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 51.

[37] Kavanagh had undertaken the role of rural expert before, and at this time in his career, he was cultivating in Dublin the role of "village explainer." Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 170.

[38] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self-Portrait*, 23.

Synge's vantage point, the Aran Islanders were purely aesthetic, "little more than gashes of red or gray, their speech a little more than a murmur of Irish rising up to him."[39] Similarly, Kavanagh's narrator sees Maguire and his men as "mechanized scarecrows," no more sentient or empowered than farm equipment or primitively animated stage props waiting for the rural drama to unfold.

The distance provided by this stance allows Kavanagh to stage the poem in what Kiberd calls "the cinematic conventions of a curious First world anatomizing the Third."[40] Kavanagh thus emphasizes the creative license enjoyed by the revivalist ethnographers and the fragmentary understanding they held of their subject matter. Although the ethnographic work in which the revivalists engaged used some scientific methodology, the data they gathered was presented "cinematically," or with a view to some predominantly aesthetic goal. Because the revivalist ethnographers had no professional stake in the discipline, they were free to make creative choices about what data would be presented and how it would be framed. By engaging in what Castle calls "undisciplined use of

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[39] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 111.

[40] Declan Kiberd, "Underdeveloped Comedy: Patrick Kavanagh," 593.

ethnographic materials and anthropological theories,"[41] the revivalists dissected rural life, assuming that the examination of its bits and pieces would ultimately offer complete understanding of it.

Despite such shortcomings, the revivalist ethnographer enjoyed the reputation of an expert, and as such, his duty was to "grasp" the native's point of view, and, using his greater knowledge and skill, realize the peasant's vision of the world.[42] The archetypal peasants possessed neither the ability to theorize their own social existence nor the rhetorical savvy to present a "true picture" of their own culture. Portrayed as "half vegetable," as Kavanagh describes Maguire, the peasants were ciphers onto which the revivalist ethnographer could project his own needs. These needs ranged from the ideological—a desire to overcome "inauthentic" conditions by appealing to the authenticity of the "primitive"—to the spiritual and the sexual.[43]

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[41] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 10.

[42] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge; New York: Dutton, 1932), 65. Qtd. in Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 21.

[43] Revivalists also show this ambivalence, but they differ from Malinowski and other ethnographers in "their capacity to explore the critical potential of *in*authentic representations in the on-going struggle for national self-determination and self-identification." Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 24.

As Castle states, this type of projection is a condition of legitimate anthropological and ethnographic work. The distance that is part of the observer-observed relationship leads the anthropologist or ethnographer to feel alienated not only from his subjects, but also himself. Both anthropologists like Malinowski and revivalists like Synge succumbed to boredom and despair, giving over to their literary impulses when they felt that they had failed to make a connection with the natives. The result of this pathology is a sort of therapeutic ethnography in which the revivalist ethnographer does the work primarily to learn about himself. In his diaries, for example, Malinowski contemplates his feelings of alienation and his loss of self.[44] Similarly, Synge felt that much of the primitive simplicity of the Aran Islanders was beyond him. Unlike Malinowski, however, he suppressed these doubts about his own ability to understand the natives he was observing and kept his feelings concealed in his unpublished field notes.[45]

Just as Malinowski and Synge either did not recognize or simply repressed their feelings of alienation and loneliness, Kavanagh's narrator presents his ignorant peasant subject as incapable of knowing his own

[44] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 27.
[45] Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, 113.

thoughts. As "half vegetable," the peasant subject is insensitive even to his own sexual yearnings:

> Turn over the weedy clods and tease out the tangled skeins.
> What is he looking for there?
> He thinks it is a potato but we know better
> Than his mud-gloved fingers probe in this insensitive hair.[46]

But whose yearnings are these, really? The possibility that "we," the narrator and the reader, are projecting our own desires onto the oblivious peasant subject emerges as Maguire plows his field:

> The twisting sod rolls over on her back—
> The virgin screams before the irresistible sock.
> No worry on Maguire's mind this day
> Except that he forgot to bring his matches. (38)

This scene calls attention to the narrator's over-the-top description, as well as the ironic distance of his perspective. At the same time, this moment (along with the poem's masturbation scenes) highlights the peasant's metaphoric impotence. Though Maguire performs a symbolic rape, his lack of self-awareness and self-advocacy render him impotent towards his own land, which has already been ravaged by history. [47]

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[46] Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger* in *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin Adair, 1964), 35. All subsequent in-text citations will be to this edition.

[47] In this metaphor, the land is a sexual subject, what Eagleton calls "the torn victim of imperial penetration." See John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Cambridge, 1972), 1. Qtd. in Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great*

But Kavanagh does not stop at metaphor with Maguire's masturbation. Instead, "flesh makes an appearance" and the reader is twice forced alongside Maguire during the act. By making Maguire's masturbation not only literal, but also very personal and very specific, Kavanagh strips it of solely national significance. Maguire is no longer an anonymous vegetable or "clayey" peasant onto which desire can be projected, but actual flesh and blood. The "passer-by" is thus rendered unable to keep a distance and simply read "what is written on the label." Instead, the reader is introduced to Maguire's often banal, sometimes unsavory, internal musings—"the wild, sprawling, scrawling mad woman's signature,/The hysteria and the boredom of the enclosed nun of his thought" (45). In other words, Kavanagh forces us to see Maguire as a whole person, not just an archetype. We are forced to "kneel where he kneels/And feel what he feels" (48).

What Maguire feels most is the absence, or "great hunger" of the title. Because of later associations with the title, the "great hunger" is often assumed to be a reference to the Great Famine. However, the hunger to

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Hunger (London: Verso, 1995), 4. The sexism of this scene and many others in the poem should be taken up in another project. Throughout the poem women are either purely sexualized or are portrayed as grotesques.

which Maguire and his fellow peasants are most prey has been caused by the social stagnation of rural life. Maguire's Ireland is described in Conrad Arensberg's 1937 study *The Irish Countryman* as "a sober, hard-working land of minute towns and small farms upon a soil not always grateful." It is "a land of hard realities" that is softened only by faith.[48] Because the land is so central to rural survival, Arensberg explains, it is also at the center of social control: "Long-established tradition and ancestral experience imprint upon [the farmer's] mind the best dates for planting, for reaping, for harrowing, for breeding cattle, and so forth." The farmer is mechanized, like Maguire and his men at the beginning of the poem, by his tie to the land and to his community, which is also invested in every member, male and female, following this same cycle: "[The farmer] is in fact less free to choose the date of sowing than his wife the hour of dinner." [49]

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[48] Conrad M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1937), 14-15. *The Irish Countryman* is an analysis of the phenomenon of late marriage and lifelong bachelorhood in rural Ireland. It is probable that O'Faolain's circle exposed Kavanagh to both *The Irish Countryman* and *Family and Community in Ireland*, a 1940 study undertaken by Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball. Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 176.

[49] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, 48. The assertion of the role of women in Irish rural society is also presented in Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution: "2.1. In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common

Maguire and his neighbors are not tied to the land through mythology, but instead through the land's constant need for attention. It is no coincidence that *The Great Hunger* is structured around one year of the agricultural cycle. Kavanagh illustrates Eagleton's point that "nature in Ireland is too stubbornly social and material a category, too much a matter of rent, conacre, pigs and potatoes for it to be distanced, stylized and subjectivated [sic]."[50] To the revivalists, things like rent, conacre, pigs, and potatoes were too specific and material to be of any poetic importance. These writers exalted the land by mythologizing it and making it the repository of cultural wisdom and lore. Kavanagh felt that, by exalting the land, revivalists also made it too simple—something that could be easily grasped, then just as easily let go: "The travellers touch the roots of the grass and feel renewed/When they grasp the steering wheels again" (52).

Kavanagh believed that the result of this mythologizing is mere sentimentality, "dust in our hands." What the travelers are really digging for is a part of themselves that never changes. However, such unchanging stuff cannot be found simply by picking up "wet clods" and hoping to

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good cannot be achieved." Tim Pat Coogan, *DeValera: Long Fellow, Long Shadow* (London: Hutchinson, 1993) 495.

[50] Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 8.

find "some light of imagination" (34). According to the Kavanagh of *The Great Hunger*, one has access to the authentic and eternal through the very things that the revivalists considered of no importance—conacre, rent, pigs, and potatoes. These entities represent the aspects of social and economic history that have led to the present situation. [51]

Kavanagh's distillation of adulthood to a one-year span brings his depiction of rural Ireland to what Martin refers to as "the here and now." Although Heaney calls *The Great Hunger* "a poem of its own place and time, transposing the griefs of the past into the distresses of the present,"[52] there is little mention in of what would seem to be most important—Irish national history. The rise and fall of Parnell, the 1916 Rising, the Treaty, the Civil War, the emergence of de Valera and the Fianna Fáil party all occurred during Kavanagh's life and would have occurred in the lifetime of a character who was sixty-five some time before 1941.[53] Why does

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[51] Patrick Kavanagh, "Studies in the Techniques of Poetry" in *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971), 68.

[52] Seamus Heaney, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh," in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, 114.

[53] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 153. The only historical moment that does get mentioned is World War II, but the mention is so brief that it emphasizes parochial rather than global concerns, as in "Epic": "That was the year of the Munich bother. Which/ Was most important?"

Kavanagh ignore these momentous events? While there had been a successful political revolution, the founders of the Irish state had failed to achieve any kind of social revolution. Subsequently, the life of a farmer like Maguire really had not changed in any fundamental way. There were only two changes that had some effect; the Land Acts turned the peasantry into a conservative land-owning class and the national school system made the vast majority of Irishmen literate by 1900. Still, due to what Gerard Rice refers to as "a lack of surplus national income," there was little change in social legislation for the first forty years of the new Irish Free State. [54]

Because of Kavanagh's belief in the value of things of "no importance," the poem's historical and political focus concerns those changes that would have affected Maguire—the economic underdevelopment that was endemic to Ireland in the 1940s. When de Valera envisioned his Ireland, he saw small, self-sufficient agricultural units, each managed by a frugal and industrious family, Gaelicist and anti-materialist. This vision was outlined in his 1943 St. Patrick's Day speech:

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[54] Gerard Rice, "The Kavanagh Years," in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, 72-73.

> The Ireland which we would desire of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of a right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the soul; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and valleys would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youth, the laughter of happy maidens…[55]

Farmers were not only the focus of the new administration; their well being was the barometer for the rest of the nation.[56] Unfortunately, the government's goal was not improvement, but the preservation of a way of life that was rapidly deteriorating.

Due to de Valera's ideological investment in sustaining a particular vision of rural life, the small, solvent farmer class dictated the values of the next era.[57] Most significantly, small farmers set the norm for the country in marital statistics. Into the late 1930's, Ireland continued to hold its record of possessing the highest percentage of unmarried men and

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[55] *Eamon de Valera's Speech to the Nation,* Broadcast on Radio Éireann on March 17th, 1943.

[56] A necessary pre-condition of general prosperity was maximizing farmers' incomes; anything that might possibly damage farmer's wealth was seen as problematic. For example, the Fiscal Inquiry Committee in 1923 argued against tariffs because they would increase agricultural laborer's wages to the detriment of the farmers. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), 523.

[57] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972,* 538.

women in the world.[58] The 1938 census figures showed that the incidence of late marriage, bachelorhood/ spinsterhood, and population decline was most pronounced in areas where small farms were prevalent.[59]

In 1939, a year after the census report, Kavanagh published three articles on marriage patterns in Ireland in which he focused specifically on the failure of Irish farmers to marry.[60] Each of these articles is a fictional interview in which Kavanagh poses as a rural expert asking bachelor farmers about their decisions to remain bachelors. The bachelors are never able to articulate why they never married; one of the figures in "Sentimental Ploughman" simply admits that he "let the time slip by."[61] The bachelors' understanding of their situation is fragmentary, much like Maguire's: "He will hardly remember that life happened to him–/ Something was brighter a moment. Somebody sang in the/ distance" (55). But these farmers, including Maguire, all believe they somehow "came

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[58] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography,* 170. Arensberg found that in Ireland, marriage took place at a later age than in any other country for which records are kept. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, 96.

[59] Quinn, Patrick *Kavanagh: A Biography*, 170.

[60] These articles were "Jazz in the Irish Countryside" (*Irish Press,* 27 January), "A Serious Problem, The Flight from the Land" (*Irish Times,* 15 April), "Sentimental Ploughman" (*Irish Times*, 30 May).

[61] Patrick Kavanagh, "Sentimental Ploughman," *A Poet's Country*: *Selected Prose*, 32.

free from every net spread/ In the gaps of experience" (34). Maguire is therefore representative of a type common to the Ireland of Kavanagh's day, the bachelor farmer "who took a field for his bride." Showing the caution many Irish peasants showed in the aftermath of the famines, Maguire postpones marriage and children to focus on his small farm.

The case may not really be that farmers changed their beliefs about marriage after the famine, but instead that those who had always behaved this way became predominant due to emigration or changes in the rural class structure. The change in marriage patterns, however, has also been associated with familism, a system of farm inheritance in which one son inherited the farm, but was neither able to take possession of the land nor marry until the parents were willing to relinquish their ownership of both the home and of the land. The fact that parents were living longer served to exacerbate an already dismal situation.[62]

In *The Great Hunger*, Maguire is seen by his community a role model; by escaping the reins of matrimony, he has made his farm one of the most successful in the region and has consequently become a pillar of the community. The bachelor-subjects of Kavanagh's articles also

[62] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972,* 340-341.

represent themselves in this way, as if bachelorhood was simply a matter of choice. Although Kavanagh does not question this belief in the articles, aiming more for entertainment than analysis with these portraits as he did in *The Green Fool,* there is evidence that his feelings on the subject went much deeper. In "The Drain Cleaner," an unpublished story predating *The Green Fool*, Kavanagh takes the reader inside the head of an elderly bachelor, John, as he muses on his reasons for not marrying. Underlying his reasons, most of them practical considerations having to do with his comfortable arrangement with his also unmarried sister, is an undercurrent of fear and entropy. In the end of the story, Kavanagh shows John alone on the headlands, a portrait of pathos born out of a situation over which both he and his sister feel powerless.[63]

In his position on rural matrimony, Kavanagh echoes Arensberg's description of the paradox of Irish rural life: "A social system centering so strongly round marriage and the family condemns a large proportion of its members to celibacy and long-preserved virginity."[64] The quiet undercurrent of fear and entropy in "The Drain Cleaner" thus becomes in

[63] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 172.
[64] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, 102.

The Great Hunger "a life-defying ideology masquerading as religion."[65] The tragedy of this paradox is the lost potential for happiness. Maguire loses his chance by yielding to "ignorance giving him the cowards blow" and listening uncritically to his mother, his church, and his community.

With *The Great Hunger*'s focus on the culturally, economically, and sexually repressed state of an Irish farmer, it is clear why most critics and readers assume that Kavanagh chose to use the Great Famine of the mid-19th century as a metaphor for the problems of contemporary rural life. However, Kavanagh maintained that his choice of title had absolutely nothing at all to do with the Famine. In fact, he alleged that the phrase had never before been used as a synonym for famine. Kavanagh claimed that Cecil Woodham-Smith "ruined" his title by using it for her 1963 study; from then on, no one would be able to divorce the two. Quinn allows that Kavanagh might have been right about part of his claims, showing that neither the English phrase, nor its translation in Irish, *an gorta mór,* had been used in print prior to the publication of either work. [66]

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[65] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography,* 177.

[66] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 179. I conducted some casual research to determine when the phrase *an gorta mór* or *the great hunger* first came to be used in print to refer to the famine. I found nothing that predated either Kavanagh's poem or Woodham-Smith's book.

Of course, Kavanagh's protestations may be slightly disingenuous, for Maguire's relationship to the land is bound up in the legacy of the Great Famine. Most notably, the Famine led to the emergence of a materialistic culture which, in turn, affected the way the land would be viewed by generations of Irish farmers like Maguire. While the revivalists saw the land as the receptacle of wisdom and de Valera saw the land as the embodiment of national identity, the peasant post *an gorta mór* saw the land as a thin divider between livelihood and destruction. Fear of famine made the farmers live a mean existence in which "life is more lousy than savage." Because the land required constant attention and an often superstitious devotion, a culture soon emerged that devalued sensuality and intellectualism. In this cultural climate, wisdom "knows the price of all things/ And marks God's truth in pounds and pence and farthings" (38).

Maguire, weighted down with responsibilities of the clay, the word, and the flesh, is forced to navigate between the two predominant views: land as metaphor and land as practical, yet paralyzing, reality. Armed with the only tools he has—his plow and the knowledge he has

gained from the newspapers, almanacs, and the occasional school reader—

> He stands between the plough-handles and he sees
> At the end of a long furrow his name signed
> Among the poets, prostitutes. With all miseries
> He is one. (32)

This placement of Maguire with "all miseries" makes him representative of another national type, the saint— "a Matt Talbot of Monaghan."[67] According to Arensberg, the label "saint" serves as a sociological category within a rural community. One's saintliness is proportionate to one's value in the community; more specifically, one's saintliness is reliant upon the way one succeeds in filling the role rural life assigns.[68] This role encompasses everything from maintaining a pleasant demeanor to skillfully directing farm work.[69] The nature of this very rural sort of sainthood underscores the parochial importance of self-denial.

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[67] Matt Talbot, who lived in Dublin from 1856 to 1925, was addicted to drink. At 28, he took a pledge of abstinence and lived a holy life until his death. Until the 1950s, his grave was one of the most visited monuments in the Dublin area. Thornton Weldon, "Virgin Queen or Hungry Fiend: The Failure of Imagination in Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger", Mosaic,* 12:3 (1979), 155-156; accessed through *PCI Fulltext*, 20 November 2004. Also see Mary Purcell, *Matt Talbot and His Times* (Dublin: Gill & Son 1954).

[68] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, 119.

[69] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, 120.

Maguire is indeed a saint in these ways. Additionally, although Maguire does ultimately become rooted to a life of duty to the land and denied sensuality, he never becomes ridiculous or grotesque like his mother or his sister. What saves him is that he once did have the capacity for sensuality, sympathy, and imagination. His tragic flaw is that he is unable to trust the validity of his own experience, the sound of his heart "call[ing] his mother a liar." He does not listen long enough to his senses or his heart, or to his own experience. Like his mother, he resigns himself to trust instead in the "Nature that never deceives," the church, and the community, all of which deaden and ultimately kill his ability to use the "five simple doors of sense." Not only do his fingers become dull and "mud-gloved" but so do his intuitive faculties.

Similarly, Maguire's Catholicism leads him to disdain the imperfect, yet tangible joys of life for the absolute and complete—things that are outside the realm of his physical existence. Instead of seeing children picking flowers and appreciating the beauty of the scene just for what it is, for example, he sees the children as "picking up life's truth singly. But he dreamt/of Absolute envased bouquet–/All or nothing" (41). These same beliefs ruin his chance for romantic success because they

cause him "to rush beyond the thing/To the unreal" (41). Consequently, he begins to read symbols "too sharply," or too narrowly. Now that these symbols are rendered meaningless, he can not find a way to put them to practical or poetic use:

> He sat on the railway slope and watched the evening,
> Too beautifully perfect to use,
> And his three wishes were three stones too sharp to sit on,
> Too hard to carve. Three frozen idols of a speechless muse. (41)

In a very literal sense, his sensuality atrophies and finally petrifies, becoming a relic of past and passed possibilities.

Maguire's inability to make use of his experience is another form of impotence. However, his speechless muse does not make him one of Carleton's stammering, illogical peasants. His frustration is particular, even idiosyncratic in that he is outside of his community and outside of the expectation of the peasant in his frustrated sensuality. Maguire is really not a hero, nor a saint, but a fool. Kavanagh emphasizes the moment Maguire comes to this role by describing it in a lyric reminiscent of Wordsworth:

> Sitting on a wooden gate,
> Sitting on a wooden gate,
> Sitting on a wooden gate,
>
> He didn't care a damn.

Said whatever came into his head,
Said whatever came into his head,
Said whatever came into his head,
And inconsequently sang. (43)

Kavanagh's argues in *The Green Fool* that "being made a fool of is good for the soul" (11). Unlike the role of saint or hero, the role of the fool is freeing; if only for a brief period, it sets Maguire apart from the rest of his community.

On several occasions, Kavanagh claimed that the fool was his favorite role. Being the consummate outsider, however, also caused him considerable pain throughout his life and career. At the moment of Maguire's transformation into the fool, Kavanagh's ambivalence toward his character becomes clear, and Kavanagh's authorial voice and the narrative voice become hard to disentangle. Foster describes the narrative voice as being torn between being an insider "who knows the small farmers so intimately that we suspect he is uncomfortably close to being Patrick Maguire" and an outsider "eager to dissociate himself from Maguire… with a truculent knowingness… that holds Maguire at bay like a contagion."[70]

[70] John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh: A Reappraisal," 145.

In other words, the narrator's voice mimics the ambivalence of the ethnographer-revivalist who watches from a distance yet yearns to belong, similar to Kavanagh's voice in both "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" and "Shancoduff." This is most apparent when the narrator expresses his feelings upon watching Maguire's mother's funeral:

> O what was I doing when the procession passed?
> Where was I looking?
> Young women and men
> And I might have joined them. (49)

The narrator is similar to the "young women and men," yet because of his distance he can voice what Maguire never could—the moment at which he became rooted in the clay:

> I remember a night we walked
> Through the moon of Donaghmoyne,
> Four of us seeking adventure,
> It was midsummer forty years ago.
> Now I know
> The moment that gave the turn to my life.
> O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever.
> (51-52)

This moment of recognition echoes the sense of betrayal captured in 1941's "Stony Grey Soil":

> You told me the plough was immortal!
> O green-life-conquering plough!
> Your mandril strained, your coulture blunted
> In the smooth lea-field of my brow.

This feeling of entrapment by the soil, or the rural milieu, is further explored in *Tarry Flynn*.

Kavanagh's ambivalence about Maguire is key to understanding the role *The Great Hunger* played in his changing perceptions of himself as an artist. While Maguire's entrapment is physical, Kavanagh's is more figurative, as he says in introduction to a 1960 BBC broadcast of *The Great Hunger*: "the …thing in *The Great Hunger* is what the newer critics now call 'committed': it is stuck to the ground—the old idea of having your roots in the soil. And it seems to me it is not a good thing to be stuck to the ground." [71] The poem in this sense serves as Kavanagh's complaint against his dilemma of being "rooted" not only to the soil but to misinterpretations and mistaken expectations about his work. He is lamenting his inability to escape the rural as his subject matter, even as he elects to return to it again and again.

Kiberd states that *The Great Hunger* is a reworking of Beckett's 1934 thesis that the failure of the revivalists to explore self was inevitable. By choosing to seek in the idealized peasant a reflection of themselves, they

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[71] Patrick Kavanagh, "Introducing *The Great Hunger*" in *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh, 15.

left themselves no real possibility for self-analysis or criticism.[72] However, like the revivalists whose anthropological work served as a sort of therapeutic act, Kavanagh also used the rural milieu to work out his own identity. In *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh does this by creating a controlling role for himself in the poem as the narrative voice, Maguire's interlocutor.[73] Quinn argues that the creation of this narrator is the important breakthrough of *The Great Hunger.* Before 1943, Kavanagh was only capable of writing works about "farmer-poets"—works, in other words, in which he was his own hero. In *The Great Hunger*, Quinn continues, Kavanagh separated these two roles, creating the farmer and the narrator and thereby discovering a measure of distance from his imaginative work.

In fact, the tension of the poem is that Kavanagh could not separate these roles—could not, so to speak, de-hyphenate the role of "farmer-poet." The narrator's statement that he is "locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever" presages Tarry's observation in *Tarry Flynn* that "In a hundred years from now the only thing that will ever be remembered

[72] Kiberd, "Underdeveloped Comedy," 592.
[73] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 169.

about this savage area is that I lived here awhile among the pigs."[74] These two moments betray a feeling of resignation on Kavanagh's part that he may never be able to escape the rural milieu. The key difference between these two moments, however, is that the tone in *The Great Hunger* is tragic, while in *Tarry Flynn*, it is comedic. Although Kavanagh is not able to de-hyphenate his role just yet and reach the distance he really hoped to achieve from his subject, *The Great Hunger* nonetheless helped him articulate the need for the detachment that he achieves in *Tarry Flynn*, and helped him recognize that the key to this detachment is also the difference between comedy and tragedy.

***Tarry Flynn* (1948)**

Tragedy, as Kavanagh defines it in his 1956 essay "Studies in the Technique of Poetry," is characterized by self-involvement: "If a work remains tragic then it has not been detached from the author's personal life." [75] Even a work like *The Great Hunger*, despite its "great concern for the woes of the poor," as Kavanagh describes it, is self-involved because it

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[74] Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (England: Penguin, 1983) 140. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

[75] Patrick Kavanagh, "Studies in the Technique of Poetry" in *Man and Poet*, 242.

is so carefully constructed to present a particular point of view: "the social land; it is far too strong for honesty." The work thus becomes hypocritical, and "can a thing be truly compassionate if it is touched with hypocrisy?"[76]

Comedy, Kavanagh felt, was more truthful and compassionate; it alone provided the necessary distance, the "not caring" that tragedy lacked.[77] By providing distance, it allowed an artist to view the more affirming aspects of experience: "A man hovers above his own tragedy and views it with an equal eye. And as he looks he sees that this tragedy is budding many blossoms of love and other compensations."[78] This ability of comedy to provide detachment is also grounded in that comedy trusts the lessons of experience while tragedy looks outside of itself for verification of its worth. Kavanagh makes this point comically when he blames his own inability to write tragedy on misplacing his copy of *The Birth of Tragedy*: "I am compelled to make do with my own experience."[79] This recognition—that one could use comedic detachment to break free of constraints and to have confidence in personal experience rather than the

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[76] Kavanagh, "Introducing *the Great Hunger*," 15.
[77] Kavanagh, "Studies in the Technique of Poetry," 242.
[78] Kavanagh, "Studies in the Technique of Poetry," 244.
[79] Kavanagh "Studies in the Technique of Poetry," 244.

voice of the metropolis—embodies the final permutation of Kavanagh's parochialism and is central to *Tarry Flynn*.

Because Kavanagh later denounced his autobiographical work *The Green Fool* as a "stage Irish lie," critics often consider *Tarry Flynn* a corrective. Both works combine a portrait of the artist with a portrait of his region,[80] but while *The Green Fool* attempts to present a general view of Irish rural life, *Tarry Flynn,* like *The Great Hunger*, focuses on one particular individual and his relationship to his community and land. This narrow and idiosyncratic focus emphasizes the parochial nature of *Tarry Flynn* and its connection to *The Great Hunger*. Not only do both works show the evolution of Kavanagh's parochial vision, they also show development of Kavanagh's ideas about his own relationship to his rural milieu and to his writing.

The first incarnation of *Tarry Flynn* was the novel *Stony Grey Soil,* which Kavanagh spent much of the 1940's revising.[81] *Stony Grey Soil* was anticlerical; Frank O'Connor describes it as a story of young people "in

[80] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 256.

[81] In 1944, the novel was serially published in *The Bell* as three excerpts titled "Three Glimpses of Irish Life."

conflict with the furious piety and Puritanism of Catholic Ireland,"[82] and compared it to other, similarly disenchanted anti-revivalist realist fictions.[83] The novel was based on a real event in Innsikeen in which the church shut down local youths' attempts to build a dance hall in the parish.

The problem with *Stony Grey Soil*, Kavanagh thought, was that it aspired to social criticism—a relic from the period when he tried to emulate the *Bell* crowd. *Stony Grey Soil* had many similarities to his other major work of this period, *The Great Hunger*, particularly in who Kavanagh chose to blame for the oppression of the poetic spirit of rural men: "Women, the priests and the fields…"[84] However, "[t]o lay bare the myth of living, to tear up the faith and show nothing but futility" now ran counter to his philosophy as an author. [85] Now he wanted to focus on day-to-day life, "telling what people did in a peasant community."[86]

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[82] Frank O'Connor "The Future of Irish Literature," *Horizon*, (1942). Qtd. in Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography,* 159.

[83] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic,* 119.

[84] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic,* 225.

[85] Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 253.

[86] *Lapped Furrows: Correspondence 1933-1967 Between Patrick and Peter Kavanagh: With other documents*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1969), 47.

Consequently, he took out the dancehall plot, stating that it was a "big lie,"[87] an extraordinary and atypical event in the rural milieu.

In *Tarry Flynn*, as in *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh emphasizes the sense of stagnation. Tarry lives in a "townland of death" in which he could "for a four mile radius …only count four houses in which there were married couples with children" (28-29). In this, *Tarry Flynn* is less like its purported influence, Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, which has a more picaresque and lighthearted tone and more like McNamara's *Valley of the Squinting Windows,* which also portrays the inhabitants of a rural town who revel in the misfortunes of others. In *Valley of the Squinting Windows*, the seducer, Ulick, tells the object of his affections, Rebecca:

> Around and about here they are all dead—dead. No passion of any kind comes to light their existence. Their life is a thing done meanly, shudderingly within the shadow of the grave… They hate me and now they will hate you. The sight of us walking together like this must surely cause them to hate us still more.[88]

In their ruminations on the stagnation of Irish rural society, both *Tarry Flynn* and *Valley of the Squinting Windows* share similarities to *The Great Hunger*. Tarry and Ulick might have been Maguire in his youth. However,

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[87] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic,* 226.
[88] Brinsley MacNamara, *Valley of the Squinting Windows,* 70.

while Maguire experiences deprivations due to the enforced celibacy of the small farmer, Tary and Ulick experience the decline of a rural community that could only provide few of its young people financial security, and that, in turn, could provide even fewer young people the promise of marriage. As Ruth Fleischman states: "*The Great Hunger* concentrates on the crippling effects of such conditions on the individual; *Tarry Flynn* shows both what potential of worthwhile life is lost when the young people fly from the land, and why they must go."[89]

However, Kavanagh's tone in *Tarry Flynn* never becomes as nihilistic or as caustic as that of *The Great Hunger*. After all, *Tarry Flynn* is a novel about youth, while *The Great Hunger* is about adulthood. Symbolically, *The Great Hunger* is anchored by the autumn month October, while *Tarry Flynn* is set in summer. Even though Tarry's sexual frustrations and misadventures are similar to those of Maguire, Tarry's youth makes his experiences seem comic. We don't believe that he is destined for a life of loneliness and celibacy. Instead, Tarry's recognition

[89] Ruth Fleischman, "Old Irish and Classical Pastoral Elements in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*," in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World, Vol. 2, Comparison and Impact*, ed. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), 321.

that he must leave some day stimulates his powers of observation and memory.[90] Leaving is never an option for Maguire.

Because Tarry has the option of leaving, as Kavanagh himself did, his labor on the land takes on a different tone than Maguire's. It is not fraught with the same survivalist gravity. Rather, it is an opportunity to experience beauty and joy. In its depiction of farm work, *Tarry Flynn* has origins in the poem "Threshing Morning:"

> On an apple-ripe September morning
> Through the mist-chill fields I went
> With a pitch-fork on my shoulder
> Less for use than for devilment.[91]

In this poem, Kavanagh's muse is his youthful exuberance. More importantly, however, the "devilment," or sense of humor in "Threshing Morning" transfers into *Tarry Flynn.* It is this comic turn, as we will discuss later, that makes the novel the culmination of Kavanagh's parochial vision.

Tarry initially uses his work on his land to train his imagination and powers of observation. He is not interested in *landscape* as either his prison or a poetic or patriotic ideal as much as he is the individual

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[90] Ruth Fleischman, "Old Irish and Classical Pastoral Elements in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*," 317.

[91] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 39.

components that make up the landscape. Kuno Meyer's observations on monastic Old Irish nature poetry can also apply to Tarry's observations about the land: "It is characteristic of these poems that in none of them do we get an elaborate or sustained description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures or images, which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skillful touches."[92] Tarry focuses on the components of a landscape not as the "occasional relaxation of men whose real life is elsewhere," but as "the familiar companion and intimate environment of their everyday being."[93] The familiarity of things such as a flower or "a stone in a ditch" makes them beautiful to Tarry. However, the things typically thought of as beautiful to outsiders do not register with Tarry: "Sometimes he went with visitors to what were called beauty spots and these fools would point and say: 'Isn't that a wonderful scene?' But these scenes did nothing to him and were not wonderful" (48).

Tarry doesn't need to know the names of the flowers in his fields "unless he wanted to tell somebody who didn't know about them"

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[92] Kuno Meyer, *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry* (1911), qtd. in Ruth Fleischman, "Old Irish and Classical Pastoral Elements in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*," 312.

[93] Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (1947: reprinted Oxford, 1970) 111f. Qtd. in Fleischman, "Old Irish and Classical Pastoral Elements in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*," 312.

because he has the reality (89). Jorge Luis Borges says that some things are so a part of a culture that they become invisible to the native poet; "…what is truly native can and often does dispense with local colour…"[94] Similarly, Kavanagh sees no need to paint the native landscape and people in a way to make them more palatable to a foreign audience. There are no concessions to non-local readers in the idiom.

This reality certainly holds beauty for Tarry, but can also constrain in ways that the casual visitor or foreign reader does not see. As the clay can be a fiend, a muse, or a virgin bride in *The Great Hunger*, so do "the ragged little fields" of *Tarry Flynn* have a spirit that affects the temperament and destinies of the people who live there:

> It is not to be wondered at that the minds of the natives were shaped by and like the environment. In cul-de ac pocke valleys all the way up the length of the townland were other smaller farms, inaccessible, and where the owners were inclined to be frustrated and, so, violent. (20)

The land's ability to affect the people in this way is by no means mystical; the people with the lesser land are clearly going to be more frustrated than those, like the Flynns, who have a comfortable farmhouse. And, in turn,

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[94] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." Qtd. in Michael Smith, "The Contemporary Situation in Irish Poetry," in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*: *A Critical Survey*, 154.

these frustrations are going to turn into bitter rivalries that span generations. These frustrations and rivalries are reflected in the type of country language Kavanagh uses; it is not lyrical, but instead rough and scatological. The book differs from *The Green Fool* in this way; as Quinn states, "gone are the ceilidhes and story-telling sessions, beloved of the folklorist. This is the grim, tight-fisted rural Ireland of the Depression years."[95]

The novel is a continuation of the drama between the poet figure and the drovers in "Shancoduff." Both parties view each other with judgments based on land and position. The land, like that described in "Epic" as being "surrounded by … pitchfork-armed claims," is the keeper of this community's past. Rivalries are the secret lore of the community; the "real fairies, fairies of the imagination, bitter and ironic fairies too" are tucked away behind shoulder-stones purported to have been hurled by Finn McCoole (134). Occasionally these secrets surface, like the detritus in the drain or "the heavy-smelling fungi and flowers that grew in the dark ditches" (41). As a poet, Tarry is enamored of the secrets, both dark and light, that the land seems to reveal only to him: "Hate and jealousy made

[95] The novel is set in 1935. Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 233.

love—even the love of land—an exciting adventure" (172). Tarry's fascination, however, makes him blind to the very real effects these secrets can have on the parish.

Tarry's relationship to the land differs from that of other members of the community, especially that of his friend Eusebius. Eusebius comes from a line of Gaelic enthusiasts, and as such, has "a sentimental regard for poetry—especially the poetry of James Clarence Mangan and translations of Gaelic poems" (11). Even though he is the truer Gael, he is immune to the "ancient roguery" of the land that constantly distracts Tarry, even clearing away the "fairy-invested" boulders in his fields. Like the "fairy-invested" rocks, Eusebius's poetic façade hides a materialist soul. Throughout the novel, Eusebius is always on the make, "the chance of making a few shillings" crashing "like a stone through the window of his romantic mind…" (48-49). Tarry's inability to recognize Eusebius for what he is—someone who eschews poetry in favor of ordinance maps—ultimately leads to his downfall in the community.

Not only can the land produce acrimony among neighbors, it can also produce poets, prophets, and "the miracle of wings," which can allow a poet to be detached and fly above the fray. Tarry must learn several

lessons before he can grow as an artist. The greatest of these lessons is that he must privilege the poetry of his own experience over the poetry of the printed word. First, he must realize that his poetic labors and his physical labors do not exist independently of one another. He typically tries to compose verse as he ploughs, and as Fleischman points out, *verse* originally meant the turn or furrow of the plough.[96] When he allows both labors equal status, he finds satisfaction: "Was he interested very deeply in his work? In some ways, yes. Although he was trying to compose a verse as he worked he was also thinking with much comfort of the excellent progress his potatoes were making" (23). When he gets too involved in his farm work, taking too much pride in the growing of his potatoes, for example, the clay sneaks into the back of his boots, miring him within it. In these instances, he has to forcibly break free.

It is no mistake that his name is Tarry, for tarrying is what he tends to do and what threatens to mire him in the soil. Tarrying, or passivity, kills the fire of life, as shown in the community's response to the mission that comes to Dargan to cleanse it of its sins: "A layer of sticky soil lay between the fires in the heart preventing a general conflagration. The

[96] Ruth Fleischman, "Old Irish and Classical Pastoral Elements in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*," 320.

Mission had lifted up the limp body of society in Dargan, but as soon as the pressure was relaxed it fell back again and the grass grew over the penitential sod" (42). Hard work and the struggle against entropy allow the artist to grow the wings of experience and "to fly away from this clay-stricken place" (44). This is a lesson Maguire never had the luxury of learning. At some point, the struggle and the work just became too much to resist:

> So Maguire got tired
> Of the no-target gun fired
> And returned to his headlands of carrots and cabbage
> To the fields once again
> Where eunuchs can be men
> And life is more lousy than savage. (31)

Many Maguires may have had to make this sacrifice so that the Tarrys could emerge: "The land keeps a man silent for a generation or two and then the crust gives way. A poet is born or a prophet" (28).

Tarry often believes that "if he had been entirely passive he might have become wise" (90). But this passive wisdom is the consolation prize granted to Maguire for his acceptance of entropy: "he'll understand the/Quality of the clay that dribbles over his coffin./He'll know the names of the roots that climb down to tickle his feet" (54). This passive wisdom is what makes Maguire a good son, a respected farmer, and a

pillar of his community, but at the cost of his life. Tarry intuits this when he expresses reluctance about taking possession of his new farm. He fears it would "set him up firmly among the small farmers—fixed him forever at the level of the postman and the railway porter. The new farm only drew attention to their real state. A tramp poet would be above him" (82). Accepting the parcel of land would place him in the same trap as the narrator of *The Great Hunger*, who exclaims "O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows forever" (49-50).

One of the key differences between Tarry and Maguire, however, is that Tarry is capable of exercising and developing his sensual faculties. By looking closely and fixedly on things such as a struggling beetle, he becomes more sensually aware. He eventually learns to detach and watch himself with greater distance. Observing the fields, the stones, the birds, and every other natural thing in his parish, he could learn quite a bit, "but hardly enough" (99). The introversion that goes along with, he feels, leads to "aridity;" however, he needs to find a way to detach from his milieu.

Detachment from his parish proves to be more difficult than he thought. Although he is considered a peculiarity within the parish, he has a distinct role—he is their fool. His neighbors and family share the

perspective of the reader of the novel that Tarry is a naïve, rather lazy, and self-absorbed young man. The way he appears to others finally becomes apparent to him when he witnesses a spoŧ on impersonation of himself during a mock trial held by his neighbors:

> *Solicitor:* You're a bit of a poet, Flynn, I believe? (laughter).
> *Petey* (attempting to mimic Tarry): There's a great beauty in stone and weeds (more laughter). (120)

Tarry's underestimation of his neighbors' imaginative and observational capacity is reflected in Kavanagh's 1954 essay, "Return in Harvest," in which he remarks on the memories the men in the pub in Inniskeen have about his youth: "Curious how I should have forgotten and these people should have remembered."[97]

Just as the community relies on Tarry performing the role of the fool, so too is Tarry reliant on his community and his family to allow him the luxury to explore his poetic side. All of the women in Tarry's house minister to his needs in minor ways, but in doing so, they allow him to be absent-minded about mundane things. The assumption is that they are more capable of these mundane tasks because they are not distracted by abstractions. Tarry's sister, for example, is able to find his cap for him

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[97] Patrick Kavanagh, "Return in Harvest," *The Bell,* April 1954, 29-35, in A *Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, 108.

because she is blind to the newspaper that covers it. Because Tarry is so dependent on his family and community, the only way he can detach from it is to reconcile with them. This sort of detachment would allow Tarry to see the "beauty and humor" of his life, just as the format of the comic novel allows Kavanagh to detach from himself and see the humor in his own youthful posturing.

Although Uncle Petey's arrival seems to provide Tarry with wings, the uncle represents the wrong way to detach. The only success the uncle has achieved was that "he had learned not to care" (182). His knowledge comes not from experience but from the books he carries around, the titles of which show a scattered and facile attempt to be "broad": *Imitation of Christ*, H.G. Wells's *History of the World*, a book about Ireland, and a cheap American copy of *Das Kapital* (183). He tries to denigrate sensual experience for Tarry when he discourages Tarry from using his greatest skill—observation: "'Shut your eyes and you'll see it better,' said the uncle paradoxically" (188). Perhaps the uncle's greatest crime, however, is that he has never reconciled himself to his past or to the community. In his view that "[t]he best way to love a country like this is from a range of not

less than three hundred miles" (185). He mistakes physical distance for detachment.

The uncle is an unsatisfactory and unconvincing device to get Tarry to leave his beloved parish. As many readers have noted, Tarry's departure is presented rather abruptly; perhaps this is because Kavanagh's own departure from Inniskeen was rather abrupt as well: "I had no messianic impulse to leave. I was happy. I went against my will. A lot of our actions are like that. We miss the big emotional gesture and drift away."[98] Perhaps because Kavanagh himself was ambivalent about leaving, it is unclear if Tarry really leaves, or even if it is a good idea to leave. The question is ultimately irrelevant; Tarry's final speech shows that he has achieved the ideal of detachment. The roots that have simultaneously plagued and comforted him are dragging up, and he is actually describing the scene from a point well outside:

> The uncle continued talking but Tarry was not listening. He was back in Drumnay looking for his cap on top of the dresser. He was walking along the dry brown headland of the potato field. He was coming home alone from the crossroads of a Sunday evening and when he got home nobody was in the house save his mother who was making pancakes for him. He was wearing a new suit and he had a new soul, brand new, wondering at the newly created world. (188)

[98] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self Portrait*, 10.

It is telling that Tarry has also detached from the uncle, who is still holding forth on how Tarry should live his life.

Because the uncle serves only as an awkward *deus ex machina* within the novel, Quinn sees him as Kavanagh speaking to his younger self.[99] I think it is perhaps more apt to say that the uncle represents what might have happened to Kavanagh had he remained the autodidact presented in *The Green Fool* and retained the bitterness of tone present in *The Great Hunger*. Young Tarry should not be listening to this voice, but instead trusting in his own intuition and observation.

Tarry in this final scene is finally able to rise above, to his own Parnassus where "[t]he net of earthly intrigue could not catch him" and he would be on a new level on the horizon "on which there was laughter" (178). He can achieve this transcendence by simply setting down to write:

> Looking down at his own misfortunes he thought them funny now. . . . He was in his secret room in the heart now. Having entered, he could be bold. A man hasn't to be on his best behavior in Heaven; he can kick the furniture around. He can stoop down and pick up lumps of mortality without being born again to die. (178)

The key to Tarry's transcendence is humor; it allows bad behavior of a divine and truthful sort. The devilment and unthinking joy afforded by

[99] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 249.

the "Heaven" of detachment is reiterated as Kavanagh closes the novel with his poem "Threshing Morning," using it to describe the scene Tarry envisions which "takes place as a song" (188). Kavanagh held up the joy of "Threshing Morning" and the humor of *Tarry Flynn* as a key parochial ideal, but one that he attained only inconsistently in the latter part of his career, after spending much of late 40s and 50s writing vitriolic literary and social criticism.

As mentioned before, Kavanagh commended *Tarry Flynn* in 1964 for its parochial vision, claiming that it was not only the truest and best expression of the small farming society of South Monaghan but also the "only *authentic* account of life as it was lived in Ireland this century."[100] Despite Kavanagh's pride in the work, however, it had a difficult time finding a publisher and establishing an audience. Four "pictoralisations" from *Tarry Flynn* had been published by in the *Bell* in 1947,[101] and Pilot Press published the book in England in 1948. In America, the novel was sold through the Devin-Adair's Irish Book Club, which advertised it as appealing to "those who like the land and favor rural ways." Kavanagh himself was marketed to the very Catholic and conservative membership

[100] Patrick Kavanagh, *Self Portrait*, 8.
[101] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 227.

of the club as a new Robbie Burns, and "Ireland's maddest writer."[102] These sales were poor; members were offended by this particular portrayal of Irish country life, reporting back to Devlin-Adair that they found the book "realistic to a revolting degree."[103] In Ireland, the book was banned for a few weeks, and Kavanagh was pleased with the publicity.[104] The novel was not reissued until *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* appeared in 1960. *Tarry Flynn* had a life later as a play first staged in 1966, but the adaptation was exactly the kind of Abbey kitchen comedy that Kavanagh hated.[105]

Why was it so hard for the book to find a readership? The answer is, in a word, parochialism. First, the dialect was not only too hard for non-Irish English readers, but it was also almost impossible to translate into other languages. Second, to overseas readers, *Tarry Flynn* is possibly indistinguishable from the outdated genre of stage-Irish comedy, including *The Green Fool*. The differences are subtle, as Kavanagh states:

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[102] Devin Garrity, "Irish Book of the Month," *Saturday Review of Books*, (October/November 1949). Qtd. in Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 268.

[103] Letter from Devin Garrity to Patrick Kavanagh, 9 January 1950. Qtd. in Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 267.

[104] *Lapped Furrows: Correspondence 1933-1967 Between Patrick and Peter Kavanagh: With other documents*, ed. Peter Kavanagh, 134.

[105] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 253.

"The trouble with this modest humorous authentic living is that it requires a very subtle technique to get it across on radio, or in writing for that matter. The advantages are all with the loud, roaring obvious melodrama is unreal[,] nobody is involved."[106] Perhaps only locals can see the individuality and authenticity; as Quinn points out, "authenticity is a virtue that well may elude the scrutiny of literary critics."[107] The problem that some critics, including Hugh Kenner in *A Colder Eye*, see with Kavanagh is that he had only one story to tell and he told it twice, telling it "less lyrically" in 1947.[108] Nonetheless, *Tarry Flynn* satisfies the trajectory of Kavanagh's parochialism and closes a chapter in Kavanagh's life.

Tarry Flynn was Kavanagh's last pastoral and parochial work. Becoming disenchanted with the life of a poet in Dublin, he turned his sights towards more profitable modes of expression such as journalism

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[106] Patrick Kavanagh, "Return in Harvest," in A *Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, 104.

[107] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 252.

[108] Peter Kavanagh, Patrick's brother, tells the story for a third time in *By Night Unstarred*, adding in a description of Patrick's urban years. Kavanagh, Patrick *By Night Unstarred: An Autobiographical Novel*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (The Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1977).

and criticism.[109] Due to the poverty of his youth, Kavanagh saw an artist's worth reflected in his bank book; he was not willing to live a bohemian existence that too closely approximated what he had left behind.[110] In 1942, he became a "working" writer, writing urban-tinged criticism and social commentary for newspapers and journals. He had columns in the *Irish Press* and a column called "The Literary Scene" in *The Standard*.[111]

Kavanagh revisited the rural on occasion; his 1954 essay "Return in Harvest," for example, relives the joyfulness of "Threshing Morning," presenting a scene that could have been written by an older Tarry returning to his parish: "I concentrated my memory on the wiry grass that grew on the banks of the road, remembering how I had often sat there. And I saw a hump of hill and on the top of that hump I was a young man of twenty and it was a day in early April and we were sowing oats."[112] It was not until 1955, when he underwent surgery for lung cancer, that

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[109] Kavanagh's disenchantment had to do, at least in part, with the recent disappearance of writers' sources of funding. In the past, there had been state-sponsored resources for writers such as the Civil List, which had helped support Yeats and Joyce. In Kavanagh's time, the oft-promised Ministry of Fine Arts never materialized, and the Arts Council focused primarily on the plastic arts and on performance. Consequently, writers had either to support themselves or find patrons. Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 256.

[110] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 257.

[111] Quinn, *Born Again Romantic*, 254.

[112] Patrick Kavanagh, "Return in Harvest," in A *Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, 108.

Kavanagh was able to return to the rural in any meaningful way—this time melding it with the urban to create a hybrid that inspired the final aspect of his parochialism, that rootedness has less to do with place than it does with spirit.

After surgery, Kavanagh convalesced on the banks of the Grand Canal. He saw this spot as his *hegira*, or departure from his origins in Monaghan with his mind "filled with the importance-of-writing-and-thinking-and-feeling-like-an-Irishman."[113] The canal bank was where he again saw the beauty of nature, as he describes it; "It was the same emotion as I had known when I stood on a sharp slope in Monaghan, where I imaginatively stand now, looking across to Slieve Gullion and South Armagh."[114] He commemorated his canal bank reawakening in two sonnets, "Canal Bank Walk," and "Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin." These poems relocate his Parnassus from Shancoduff and Inniskeen to the center city, reliving Tarry's own moment of departure when he reimagines his parish from a point well outside of it. What matters now in Kavanagh's poetry is not the place, or "[t]he material

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[113] Patrick Kavanagh, "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," in A *Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, 281.

[114] Kavanagh, "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," 272.

itself," but imagination: "The world that matters is the world that we have created."[115]

This last statement neatly summarizes Kavanagh's journey, both in life and in his writing, from Monaghan to the banks of the Grand Canal. The landscape that he believed mattered—that of the revivalists and of national myth—paled in personal and artistic importance to the landscape that his experience and his ability to both negotiate and synthesize disparate inherited traditions had allowed him to create. The perfection of this ability led him to his final feat of parochialism, his recreation of an imagined rural idyll in the center of the city.

[115] Kavanagh, "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," 273.

Chapter 3

"A View From the Trees:" Remapping the Literary Landscapes of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds* and *The Poor Mouth*

At the end of his career, Patrick Kavanagh recreated a rural idyll on the banks of the Grand Canal, merging many of the disparate and potentially contradictory elements of his work. The novelist Flann O'Brien also creates paradoxical landscapes. These landscapes, like Kavanagh's re-imagined parish, are narrow, bounded spaces in which disparate influences—rural and urban, comic and realist, traditional and modern—interact. Unlike Kavanagh, however, O'Brien re-imagined a variety of Irish landscapes during his career, some familiar and some not-so familiar. In the next two chapters, I examine O'Brien's creation of these landscapes, reading them as places where competing notions of culture, tradition, and religion could be negotiated, and where Irish identity would no longer be essentialized.

O'Brien himself, negotiating his own identity as a working writer amongst bohemians, also existed in a somewhat transitional space, unsure

about his role. Should he rebel against the establishment that had, in many ways, disabled him as a writer? Or, should he remain loyal to the establishment values and Catholicism that were so ingrained in him? Leaning strongly towards the latter possibility, O'Brien was truly what Kiberd describes as an "Irish-speaking suburban inheritor of the national culture."[1] O'Brien held several posts in the Department of Local Government, was a fluent Irish speaker, and paid his rates responsibly. However, O'Brien could also be a nonconformist. He was publicly critical of various Free State programs and policies, especially of the expertise of "negative knowledge" that the civil service and local government rewarded.[2] In addition, he consorted nightly in pubs and underground drinking spots with bohemians before catching the bus home to suburban Blackrock.[3]

As a result of his battling impulses, O'Brien's career is tinged with both vitriol and nostalgia. Much of this vitriol was directed toward his

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[1] Declan Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism: *At Swim-Two-Birds*" in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 516.

[2] Cronin defines the expertise of "negative knowledge as simply knowing what not to do." *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm, 1989) 76-77.

[3] Anthony Cronin, *Dead As Doornails: Bohemian Dublin in the Fifties and Sixties* (1976; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 112.

bohemian contemporaries, Sean O'Faolain and the other writers of *The Bell* in particular, whom he saw as having distanced themselves from life as it is lived by the "Plain People of Ireland." He chastises these artists for shirking their civic duties, stating that "we are not making any Ireland. We just live here… some of us even *work* here."[4] He is particularly damning about their self-absorption and brazen self-promotion:

> The cloying iterance about the function of the artist in society will have to stop. Your shirt-maker or motor assembler asserts his existence by the formation of some sort of plant, however back the back–lane of its location. Your artist of today proclaims his arrival by documents attested by his personal sign-manual. He is his own boss. He himself says he is here.[5]

Often, O'Brien's criticism actually serves to highlight his insecurity about his own position as an artist. As someone who felt that his genius was overlooked, O'Brien was often put off by anyone who adopted the posture of an artist with seeming confidence.

O'Brien's uncertainty stemmed, as Kiberd points out, from being confronted with a situation similar to Kavanagh's, in which "the writer is often less anxious to say something new than to find a self that is capable

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[4] Myles na Gopaleen, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973) 342.

[5] Myles na gCopaleen, "I Don't Know," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1.3 (April 26, 1952), 3.

of saying anything at all."[6] As mentioned previously, writers of this generation were working in an age when traditional ideas about narrative and fiction were under scrutiny.[7] Often, the only available response was parody. Although O'Brien did embrace parody, satirizing principal texts of traditional Gaelic culture such as the tales of Finn and Sweeney and even more modern ones such as *An tOileanach* (*The Islandman*), O'Brien did appreciate the style of these works. Somehow these artists had been able to conjoin formal exactitude and the quotidian into a single style—something O'Brien strove to do his entire career.

O'Brien was also nostalgic for the more poetic world of ancient Ireland and even Corkery's *Hidden Ireland*, in which the artist had greater prominence.[8]

His nostalgia had no room for the preconception that humanity could be saved by reviving an outmoded language or culture, however. Although his first language was Irish, O'Brien's relationship to the official Irish promoted by the Free State government was thorny at best. O'Brien saw the promotion of a purely Gaelic Ireland as a dangerous mixture of

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[6] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 510-511.
[7] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 511.
[8] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 511.

nostalgia and fatalism that would impede the country's progress.[9] His antipathy to the language revival became apparent in his first "Cruiskeen Lawn" article in 1940, in which he mocks the uselessness of the Irish language in talking about modern issues and events such as World War II.[10] This subject would remain a recurrent theme throughout his career, most significantly in *An Béal Bocht*, published in 1941.

O'Brien was not alone in his ambivalence and uncertainty about his role as an artist. He and his peers inherited a profoundly complicated literary climate. The Ireland that they knew was not, they felt, accurately represented in the works of their illustrious predecessors. Yet they felt that there were no "Irish" settings that they could claim as their own. Given this state of affairs, O'Brien sought and ultimately found a new realm to explore, one that seemed resolutely un-literary and unworthy of artistic investigation—the newly emerging suburbs.

Suburban Parochialism

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[9] Danielle Jacquin, "'Cerveaux Lucides is Good Begob': Flann O'Brien and the World of Peasants," in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?* Irish Literary Studies, no. 49, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), 232.

[10] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 113-114.

By 1924, there was a sense that too much emphasis was being placed on Dublin as the seat of Irish identity. Writing in the *Irish Statesman*, Lennox Robinson called for a return to the country town: "Everyday a novel is dying in provincial Ireland for need of someone to write it … Back to the provinces, must be our cry…."[11] One of the reasons for this interest in returning to the rural was that, despite the flight of peasants into the cities, it was still possible to believe that the rural remained the Irish ideal; it could still be seen as complete and unspoiled. The modern city, on the other hand, no longer seemed "a man-made replica of the universe" in which law and order prevailed over chaos.[12] Due to a range of factors emerging around the turn of the twentieth century—changing mores; increasing mobility; countless advances in technology and their attendant changes in conceptions of speed, time, and space; the implications of Einsteinian physics—the city now seemed a multidimensional chaotic space.

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[11] Desmond Fitzgibbon, "Delfas, Dorhqk, Nublid, Dalway: the Irish City After Joyce," in *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture,* ed. Alan A. Gillis and Aaron Kelly (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 62.

[12] Joseph M. Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," in *The Irish Writer and the City*, Irish Literary Studies, no. 18, ed. Maurice Harmon (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984) 115.

This new conception of the city precluded any clear literary representation of it. As Joseph Hassett explains: "The 'placeness' of the city [became] linked with its past, present and future in a way that [was] difficult to describe in existing language."[13] One response to this circumstance was to develop a new language to describe the city, as Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake*. In that novel, Joyce portrays the post-Einsteinian city as a "collideroscope" to be seen in what Hassett calls "a multitiered, non-instant of time,"[14] and what Joyce called "the actual futule perteriting instant."[15]

O'Brien felt that Joyce's experiment was willfully obscure. While O'Brien would also attempt to represent the collideroscopic city, as Hassett writes, "above all, he would be clear."[16] Thus, rather than creating a new language, O'Brien instead chose to create new literary landscapes. In his novels *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *An Béal Bocht*, *The Third Policeman*, and *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Brien invents hybrid spaces, each an amalgam of real and imagined, past and present, rural and urban, traditional and modern. Each is, either literally or figuratively, a kind of literary suburb—

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[13] Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," 117.
[14] Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," 117.
[15] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1939) 143.
[16] Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," 119.

a site representing hybridity, transition, and the emergence of the growing middle class.

It is no coincidence that O'Brien claimed suburbs as his signature setting. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the city became a place where the growing middle class worked, shopped, and sought entertainment, but not where they lived.[17] By contrast, suburbs were rapidly expanding, and more and more, they seemed places where the forces shaping Irish national identity came together. Working in the municipal planning office, O'Brien saw these changes first-hand. He was familiar with the municipal reform debates that raged not only in Dublin but also in other cities around the world.[18] More specifically, he was

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[17] Joseph Brady, "Introduction," Ruth McManus. *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and Suburbs* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002) 14.

[18] Opposed in these debates were the Garden City movement, championed by Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes, and the modernist alternative, championed by Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos. The Garden City movement offered a communitarian *rus in urbe* solution to city life, building self-contained cities protected from urban encroachment by greenbelts. Le Corbusier, despite an initial interest in 'rurban' living, criticized the Garden City movement, stating that it was pointless to send people out into "fields to scrabble earth around a lot of hypothetical onions." John Rennie Short, *Imagined Country: Society, Culture, Environment* (London: Routledge, 1991), 88; qtd. in Fitzgibbon, "Delfas, Dorhqk, Nublid, Dalway: the Irish City After Joyce," 65.) Nevertheless, the Garden City movement—as well as the suburbs its philosophy spawned—grew, fueled by well-off city dwellers desiring the romantic idyll of country life but were not willing to give up the convenience and jobs of the city. (Joseph Brady, "Introduction," Ruth McManus. *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and*

familiar with how suburban development represented a peculiar negotiation of traditional and modern, old and new. Dublin Corporation saw the suburbs as a means of expanding the project of building a Nationalist and Catholic Ireland. In some suburbs, for example, Corporation officers named all of the streets after saints or the martyrs of 1916. [19] There was also a Gaelic-speaking suburb, "Gaedhealtacht Park," that was under construction from 1924 to 1934. The goal of this suburb was "to establish and maintain a community of Irish speakers at places to be selected by the society." Eligibility for membership was based on being a native speaker of the Irish language or having passed the first exam for the Fáinne.[20]

Present-day critics have also struggled with this transitional period and the writers who lived and worked during it. O'Brien in particular is often singled out. His works, critics argue, seem a hodgepodge, and neither his style nor his subjects are sufficiently literary. Thomas C. Foster,

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Suburbs (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 13) These debates even made their way into *Ulysses* in Bloom's contrasting town planning escapades. Bloomusalem in Circe is a comment on the more modernist approach, while in Ithaca, he rejects the *rus in urbe* solution of the Garden City. Fitzgibbon, "Delfas, Dorhqk, Nublid, Dalway: the Irish City After Joyce," 65.

[19] MacManus, *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and Suburbs*, 233.

[20] MacManus, *Dublin, 1910-1940: Shaping the City and Suburbs*, 274.

for example, critiques the polysemic structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, stating that "It is almost as if O'Brien decided to take everything he knew and construct a narrative framework that would allow him to put it all in."[21] Such claims fail to understand O'Brien's literary enterprise. In his novels, O'Brien explores how the tensions between various ideas about national identity are both created and negotiated in post-Rebellion Ireland. To do so, he sets his work in carefully mapped, narrowly bounded literary suburbs—spaces that reveal the influence of urbanization, the growth of the middle class, mass culture, and bureaucracy. By addressing these changes in his work, O'Brien felt that he appealed more to the experience of "The Plain People of Ireland," who served simultaneously his muse and as his ideal audience.[22]

O'Brien builds his literary suburbs by distorting familiar landscapes—Dublin, the Gaeltacht, the Irish midlands, and the small

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[21] Thomas C. Foster, "An Introduction," *A Casebook on Flann O'Brien's* At Swim-Two-Birds, ed. Thomas C. Foster [volume online]; available from http://www.centerforbookculture.org/casebooks/casebook_swim/booker.html; Internet; accessed 19 December 2003.

[22] O'Brien created in his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column an ongoing dialogue with an imagined audience called "The Plain People of Ireland." "The Plain People of Ireland" was a chorus of middle-class, presumably male voices that gave the column the feeling of a rowdy pub conversation. With their common-sense naiveté about intellectual pursuits and love of pop culture and corny jokes, the members of this constructed audience kept the cultural pretensions of O'Brien's journalist persona "Myles" in check.

towns and suburbs around Dublin—thereby baffling expectations previously held about them. In some cases, the maps of the landscapes are altered by the creation or exposure of transitional spaces within and between their known features. In other cases, O'Brien shifts perspective and presents contradictory epistemologies that a character must use to navigate through them. Throughout, there is a deliberately crafted collision of modernity and tradition, rural and urban. This collision results in a hybrid culture that develops parochial and idiosyncratic understandings of modern ideas, whether literary, scientific, or metaphysical. This last point is especially important. In his novels, O'Brien dramatizes how the middlebrow encounters and ultimately transforms the avant-garde into something new but recognizable and acceptable. No surprise, then, that he chose the modern suburb—with new houses on streets named Our Lady's Road, Kickham, and O'Leary—as the setting for some of his works.[23]

***At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939)**

[23] My definition of the middlebrow is informed by Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 125-130. See also Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture.*

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien presents a Dublin of the mind, in which he emphasizes a middle-class understanding of Irish mythology and modernism. To do so, he creates new spaces within the familiar urban landscape in order to allow the forces of modernity and tradition to interact. There are three spaces in particular where the factors that influence identity—rural and urban, modern and traditional, and past and present—meet. These areas are the Ringsend District of Dublin, Swim-Two-Birds, and the Red Swan Hotel.

Ringsend

Ringsend is a suburb located about two miles south of the Dublin city centre. Historically, it has been both a hub for trade and a gateway for invasion.[24] In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, however, Ringsend is the site of a twentieth-century cattle raid involving cowboys, "Red Indians," and the D.M.P. (Dublin Metropolitan Police). Although the setting and the mix of characters seems fantastic and even ridiculous, the weaving together of references from the American South and West, the battles of ancient Ireland, and the modern Troubles highlights the problem of grounding

[24] Ringsend supplanted Dalkey as Dublin's main port in the 17th century and Oliver Cromwell landed at Ringsend in 1649 with thousands of soldiers.

Irish identity on potentially specious myths of heroism. More generally, it also highlights O'Brien's sense that Ireland was becoming more diverse, as outside cultural influences flowed into mainstream culture.

Cowboys speak to both a rural and rebel past, and these associations have fed the Irish fascination with American cowboy stories.[25] However, the cowboy has its own distinct history within Ireland. Cattle have been raised in Ireland far longer than in the American West, and even into the twentieth century, cattle were herded to port across O'Connell Street Bridge. As long as there have been cattle in Ireland, there has also been tension between farmers and cattle workers, as shown in Kavanagh's poem "Shancoduff." One of the grand narratives of Irish literature, however, presents a more heroic image of the Irish drover or cowboy. The *Táin Bó Cuailnge,* or *The Cattle-Raid of Cuailnge*, tells the tale of Queen Medb of Connaught who gathers an army in order to steal the most famous bull in Ireland from Daire, a chieftain of Ulster.

In deliberate contrast to heroic myths such as The *Táin*, the "heroes" of the Ringsend cattle raid that sweeps across Dublin's suburbs are the very common Paul Shanahan, Slug Willard, and Shorty Andrews,

[25] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 513.

all fictional characters created by the also fictional writer, William Tracy. Tracy, also a suburban dweller, is a P.T. Barnum-like character who is said to have exhibited twenty nine lions in a cage and is "the only writer to demonstrate that cow-punching could be economically carried on in Ringsend."[26] The cowboys are forced on a journey out of the west to retrieve the cattle and "slaveys" (imported from America) that have been stolen from them by Red Kiersey, a character in the employ of a rival writer. Their journey is not from the actual west of Ireland, Connaught, to Ulster, however, but instead through the suburban "wild west" of Ringsend and Drumcondra.[27]

The climactic battle of this cattle raid is fought at Red Kiersey's Circle N Ranch, the main building of which is described as an amalgam of conflicting historical and architectural features. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of an Anglo-Irish big house, "a gothic structure of red sandstone timbered in the Elizabethan style and supported by corinthian

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[26] Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939; New York: Plume, 1976), 33. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

[27] O'Brien was not unique in his association of the suburbs with the wild west. In *My Brother Brendan*, Dominic remembers his big brother telling him that "the chisellers in Kimmage don't have time to play games, they have to go huntin' with their fathers. Take it from me, sondown, we're on our way to the wild west." Dominic Behan, *My Brother Brendan* (London: L. Frewin, 1965), 21.

pillars at the posterior" (77). That "this time-hallowed house" also observes "[t]he old Dublin custom of utilizing imported negroid labour for operating the fine electrically-equipped cooking-galley" (77-78) invokes the plantations of the American South.

In the 1930s and '40s, the gardens of Anglo-Irish big houses were opened in the summer to the public, the price of admission going to benefit local charities. O'Brien makes reference to this practice as he describes how the Circle N's "exquisite gardens" are open to the public, the price of admission benefiting the Jubilee Nurses Fund. By the late twentieth century, both Anglo-Irish big houses and plantations in the American South had become heritage destinations. By conflating these seemingly disparate traditions in his description of the Circle N Ranch, O'Brien calls attention to the way in which this commodification of sites where former struggles of class and race were fought sanitizes their past. That the spoils of such enterprises go to anodyne agents of civic betterment only highlights the troubling nature of this kind of tourism.

O'Brien also conflates ancient and modern history in his description of the climactic battle of the cattle raid. By incorporating more cowboys from Ringsend, a "crowd of Red Indians from Phoenix Park,"

and "whole detachment of the D.M.P. (Dublin Metropolitan Police) to see fair play and justice done," O'Brien turns a small skirmish into a sweeping epic battle. However, this epic battle is waged in a narrowly bounded urban setting, which makes the battle reminiscent of the Easter Rising. Not only is Red in cahoots with the British, "jobbing and shipping bullocks to Liverpool" (75), but he is also fighting Slug, Shorty, and Shanahan as a "last stand for king and country" (80). Eventually, spectators are cheering on the cowboys, "calling and asking every man of us to do his duty" (81), and Red's army is captured, led away as the rebels were marched between Dublin jails on the Sunday after the Rising. As Shanahan observes, "here were my brave men handcuffed hand and foot and marched down Lad Lane like a bunch of orphans out for a Sunday walk" (81). Red, a stand-in for Daire, the chieftain of Ulster, invokes yet another Irish legend in the way that he dies, "doing the Brian Boru in his bloody tent" (81).[28] Significantly, Brian Boru was the last king to rule a unified Ireland; after his death, the country fell into chaos and anarchy, further emphasizing the fragmentation of culture that the cattle raid depicts.

[28] Brian Boru's sons led an Irish army to decisive victory over the Vikings in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 and destroyed the Vikings' power in Ireland. Brian, too old to fight, was in his tent, awaiting news of the battle when he was killed by a Viking intruder.

The real story, which inspires the narrator to write his description of the Ringsend fracas, is much less inspirational than the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* or the Rising. Instead, it underscores the tensions that developed in the suburbs as more people from various classes mixed there.[29] The description from the press of an actual event blames "a gang of corner-boys whose horse-play in the streets was the curse of the Ringsend district" (82). In light of the layered references in the narrator's account, the summation that "no civilized community could tolerate organized hooliganism of this kind" (83) seems a jaundiced comment on the kinds of "hooliganism" that are tolerated and even celebrated as a basis for Irish identity.

By interlacing several different genres of rebel tale—classic epic, pulp fiction, national myth, and police blotter—O'Brien also questions what texts held dominance over the construction of Irish identity. Was the Irish public more familiar with Zane Grey than with the *Táin*? The answer can only be "yes." In keeping with this, Keith Booker claims that the

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[29] Brendan Behan and his family relocated to Drumlin in 1937. "Our street (Russell Street) was a tough street, and the last outpost of toughness you'd meet as you left North Dublin for the red brick respectability of Jones's Road, Fitzroy Avenue, Cloniffe Road, and Drumcondra generally." Brendan Behan, *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 149.

Ringsend episode can be read as a foreshadowing of another issue—the concern that Ireland had escaped British dominion only to be swallowed up by American culture.[30] However, this specific concern about the encroachment of American culture appears only in this particular episode of the novel. The larger question of which texts and stories hold primacy in shaping Irish identity is explored further in another hybrid location—Swim-Two-Birds.

Swim-Two-Birds

In the *Buile Suibhne*, Swim-Two-Birds (Snámh-dá-én) is one of the places Mad King Sweeney stops after he has been cursed by Saint Ronan to live among the trees. In his resistance to the encroachment of Christianity into his world, Sweeney is emblematic of the struggle of the Irish to live in both the traditional and the modern worlds simultaneously. In my reading of the novel, Swim-Two-Birds is not a clearly delineated place, but instead an indeterminate state between different worlds: the

[30] Keith M. Booker, "Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?: The Politics of *At Swim-Two-Birds*" in *A Casebook on Flann O'Brien's* At Swim-Two-Birds, ed. Thomas C. Foster [volume online]; available from http://www.centerforbookculture.org/casebooks/casebook_swim/booker.html; Internet; accessed 19 December 2003.

rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern. Two archetypal figures, the Pooka Fergus MacPhellimey and the Good Fairy, traverse this space as they journey from the Pooka's rural hut to the urban Red Swan Hotel. Within this space, the Pooka and the Good Fairy meet figures from both traditional and modern culture, as created by O'Brien: the fictional cowboys Slug Andrews, Shorty Willard, the working-class poet Jem Casey, and the Mad King Sweeney himself.

In the medieval tradition, the devil and an angel were present at the birth of a child to fight over that child's soul. Here, O'Brien supplants the devil and angel with the Pooka and the Good Fairy in order to, as he states, remove "any suggestion of the mock religious" and to keep things "on a mythological plane."[31] Like Sweeney, the Pooka, or *Puka*, is a figure that lives between the animal and human worlds. Traditionally, he can take two forms: a wild, ghastly horse that accosts unlucky individuals who happen to be abroad at night, and a friendly and loquacious wanderer who often tells tales of fortunes swindled away from families.

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[31] Flann O'Brien to A.M. Heath, 3 October 1938. Qtd. in Eva Wäppling, *Four Irish Legendary Figures in* At Swim-Two-Birds (Uppsala: ACTA Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1984), 85.

O'Brien's Pooka McPhellimey, "a member of the devil class," is of the latter type. He has a taste and refinement that complicate both his rural origins and his devil nature. In many of his tastes and assumptions, as well as his desire to be well thought of, he is similar to the narrator's uncle. Not only do they both prefer suits "of pre-war material," but they also share certain good-natured assumptions about their own civic importance. While the Pooka awakens "the beetles and the maggots and the other evil creeping things" (145) in the forest, the uncle regards himself as "the sun of his household, recalling all things to wakefulness on his own rising" (212). In many ways, both are quintessential examples of the "Dublin Man"—products of a rural upbringing, now concerned with middle-class aspirations and jobbery.

As the Pooka and the Good Fairy travel, they meet Slug, Shorty, and Jem Casey, the "Poet of the Pick and Bard of Booterstown." Casey emerges from "the thrashing and scourging of a clump in torment, a jaggle of briar-braced tangly-brambled thorniness, incensed, with a demon in its breast. Crack crack crack" (168). Because Casey's arrival is described in the same style used in Finn's staves about Sweeney, it foreshadows the arrival of the mad king. The conflation of the modern

working-class poet Jem with the legendary hero Sweeney forces the other characters to confront their beliefs about literature and culture. While it would seem that the frontiers that usually separate noble and popular literature have been abolished in this transitional space, in actuality these categories have become enmeshed in such a way that complicates previously held understandings of their classification and value.

The Good Fairy begins the discussion of classification in the Pooka's hut as he tries vainly to establish the nature of the Pooka's wife, whom he mistakes for a kangaroo. This exercise results in a rule, of sorts, that "[t]here is this distinction between marsupial and kangaroo, that the former denotes a genus and the latter a class, the former is general, and the latter particular" (175). The Good Fairy uses this same inflexible approach with literature; belletristic ideals are the general and (primarily) British artists like Eliot, Lewis, Devlin, and Wordsworth are the particular. Jem's poetry and "verse-speaking" are not even comparable to this model, yet the Good Fairy tries to understand him through it, and fails: "Was your poem on the subject of flowers, Mr. Casey? Wordsworth was a great man for flowers." (170) He also tries to classify Sweeney by placing him within a class of society that is not appropriate. Since Sweeney fails to fit

the system, he too is misunderstood by the Good Fairy: "Do you mean the Sweenies of Rathangan, inquired the Good Fairy, or the Sweenies of Swanlinbar?" (178)

Faced with the conundrum of Jem and Sweeney—"poet on poet" (179)—the Pooka, Slug, and Shorty find that their cultural experiences have not prepared them for the task of negotiating this conflation of tradition and modernity. Even though Jem is closer to their experiences, they still have trouble understanding the true nature of his poetry. For example, the Pooka's romantic ideas about the working man come into conflict with Jem's much more political concerns. The Pooka sees the working man as "the noblest of all creatures" (170) and "the backbone of family life" (171). Consequently, he mistakes Casey's assertion that "The workin' man doesn't matter" (170) for a statement that the working man isn't important. However, Casey is getting at a deeper point—that the working man does not even enter into conversations about labor, as in Free State policies. The Good Fairy, on the other hand, sees Casey and his kind as a threat, the reason why the moneyed classes are leaving the country. "Bolshevism," he feels, is "the next step" (171). Likewise, Shanahan, Slug, and Shorty all see Jem as their type of working class, a

man who enjoys a pint and with whom they can share a bawdy joke. The real concerns of the working man do not matter to these fictional working men, as evidenced by Shanahan's bastardization of Casey's refrain, "THE GIFT OF GOD IS THE WORKIN' MAN," into a celebration of the working man's beverage, "A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN."

Sweeney is more difficult for this crowd to absorb, however, as he is completely outside of their experience. They are suspicious of him because he is a man between worlds; he is neither man nor bird, of neither the air nor the earth. He has reached Parnassus, but this vision has distanced him from his people. The two strongest reactions he gets are from the hot-tempered Shorty, who wants to shoot the mad king as a "merciful act of Providence," and the Good Fairy, who just wants to shut him up: "Put green moss in his mouth, said the Good Fairy querulously, are we going to spend the rest of our lives in this place listening to talk the like of that?" (183) The other travelers merely speculate as to his sobriety or sanity as they nonetheless try to make sense of his strange utterances.

Two things save Sweeney from being either shot or left to die from the wounds he suffered in his fall from the trees. First, the Pooka recognizes Sweeney from his own mythical milieu—Sweeney is a

neighbor, of sorts—and he introduces the king to the others as someone familiar and not to be feared, but perhaps pitied: "I think I know the gentleman . . . I fancy . . . that it is a party by the name of Sweeney. He is not all in it" (178). Second, and more important, although Casey supplants Sweeney as the poet figure, he also champions his cause to the others—"bard unthorning a fellow bard." Casey makes Sweeney relevant to his fellow travelers, if only for a short while, and they are all united in their maintenance of him. But such a mixing of tradition and modernity can only happen in this fictional wilderness. This reverie is destroyed in the morning when the travelers emerged from Swim-Two-Birds into a clearing and "they wildly reproached each other with bitter words and groundless allegations of bastardy and low birth (187)."[32]

The Red Swan Hotel

O'Brien's final transitional space in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the Red Swan Hotel, is a building of many stories: "There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr. McCool, a hero of old Ireland, is on the floor above. The cellar is

[32] This can be seen as a statement on the "great hatred, little room" climate of the Dublin writers' community, centered at this time around the Palace and Pearl bars. The phrase is from Yeats's "Remorse for Intemperate Words" (1932), first published in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

full of leprechauns" (47). The narrator assembles yet another story, however, to place the fictional hotel, allegedly located on Lower Leeson Street in Dublin, within a history of commerce, rebellion, and retribution: "A terminus of the Cornelscourt coach in the seventeenth century, the hotel was rebuilt in 1712 and afterwards fired by the yeomanry for reasons which must be sought in the quiet of its ruined garden, on the three-perch structure that goes by Croppie's Acre" (34). The mention of the yeomanry adds a heavily political undercurrent; one explanation for their actions might be their desire for vengeance for the hundreds of United Irishmen executed and buried in an unmarked grave in Croppie's Acre. However, this undercurrent is subordinate to other, more banal details about the hotel, namely the legal requirements of the landlord and the manufacture of the fanlight.

Trellis purchases the hotel and compels all of his characters to live there with him so that he can keep an eye on them. His relationship to these characters is one of management and labor; his employment of his characters follows the narrator's assertion that characters should act as interchangeable parts, as would be found on a mass production assembly line: "The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a

limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet" (33). The narrator's friend Brinsley further connects Trellis's project to both mass production and the exploitation of labor when he observes that both the ridge on the hotel's fanlight and the ridge on the corset of Trellis's servant, Theresa, bear the "ineluctable badge of mass-production." "Slaveys," he continues, "were the Ford cars of humanity; they were created to a standard pattern by the hundred thousand." (43).

Just as ideas about the modern novel, built on the idea of an individual author but now "a work of reference," have changed, so has capitalism, built, according to Keith Booker "on an individualist ethic unmatched in human history," led to human beings being treated as a commodity.[33] Individuals are less interchangeable, however, if they have their own set of experiences and their own ideas about culture. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a solution to this problem is discovered and promoted by the fictional author, William Tracy. Not only did Tracy introduce cow punching to Ringsend; he also created the process of "aestho-autogamy," by which characters are born as full adults. Tracy felt that many social ills

[33] Booker, "Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?: The Politics of *At Swim-Two-Birds*."

could be combated "if issue could be born already matured, teethed, reared, educated, and ready to essay those competitive plums which make the Civil Service and the Banks so attractive to the bread-winners of to-day" (56). The ideal would be to produce workers without an outlay of expense for any education besides that which would allow them to become adequate public servants.

Aestho-autogamy produces characters with memories, but no experience to account for those memories. John Furriskey is the first character in the narrator's novel to be born in this way:

> He was consumed by doubts as to his own identity, as to the nature of his body and the cast of his countenance.
> In what manner did he resolve these doubts?
> By the sensory perception of his ten fingers.
> By feeling?
> Yes. (57-58)

In his strange "birth," Furriskey represents the condition of many young Dubliners in the early twentieth century who, whether they hailed from Dublin proper or outlying rural areas, were not only unfamiliar with the cultural memories they had inherited from the Rebellion, but also incapable of reflecting upon their inheritance in any meaningful way. The progeny of aestho-autogamy may not even rely on their senses, as the

tools needed for this level of understanding either have not been provided or were never available to begin with:

> [Furriskey] spent some time searching in his room for a looking-glass or for a surface that would enable him to ascertain the character of his countenance.
> You had already hidden the glass?
> No. I had forgotten to provide one. (59)

Furriskey must rely on Trellis to provide him with an identity, but Trellis neglects this duty. Trellis is later tried for the "considerable mental anguish" he causes his characters when he neglects to give them any guidance.

By establishing Furriskey as the villain of his novel, Trellis also breaches the narrator's dictum that "It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (33). Further breaching this dictum, Trellis hires Finn to police his novel and compel his characters to maintain the identities he has created for them. This is appropriate on one level, as Finn not only demands from his people (the *Fianna*) a certain performance of identity, but he also has his own system of punishment for those who do not abide by his rules. To be of Finn's people, one had to engage in the creation of myth. To "desist

from the constant recital of sweet poetry and melodious Irish" warrants a wound; "till a man has accomplished twelve books of poetry," he is "forced away" (20-21).[34]

As the very hub of myth-making, Finn is also at the center of the narrator's creative subconscious, serving as his muse when he settles down to write: "After an interval Finn Mac Cool, a hero of old Ireland, came out before me from his shadow" (15). However, Finn himself struggles with the responsibility of retaining a larger-than-life status for "contending with the bards." Not only must he be of such dimensions that "Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his backside" (10) but he also has to fill all mythological space:

> I am an Ulsterman, a Connachtman, a Greek, said Finn
> I am Cuchulainn, I am Patrick.
> I am Carbery-cathead, I am Goll.
> I am my own father and my son.
> I am every hero since the crack of time. (24)

The problem with being "every hero since the crack of time" is that Finn runs the risk of having no identity at all; the hyperbolic apportionment of

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[34] As Thomas Shea points out, O'Brien probably borrowed from Standish Hayes O'Grady's *Silva Gadelica* (1892) when he composed the material on Finn and the qualifications for the *Fianna*. Thomas Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1992), 95.

Finn's essence into multiple selves has reduced this "hero of old Ireland" to absurdity:

> I am the breast of a young queen, said Finn.
> I am a thatching against rains.
> I am a dark castle against bat flutters.
> I am a Connachtman's ear.
> I am a gnat. (19)

This reduction is only one of the abuses he has suffered at the hands of despotic "book-poets"; Finn's general prominence and profile have been in flux for centuries.

Historically, there have been two Finn traditions. According to Eva Wäppling, the oral tradition presented Finn as a comic, rather burlesque, old man. The "learned" tradition, on the other hand, presented him as more prophetic and heroic.[35] The learned image changed over time, however, gradually making the Finn cycle accessible to a more general audience. One of these changes came in the twelfth century when *Acallam na Senorach (The Colloquy of the Ancient Men)* brought Finn to greater prominence. Further changes continued; Finn's cycle was, as Gerard Murphy explains, "eminently suited for further development at the hands of learned storytellers in accordance with the progressive spirit of the

[35] Wäppling, *Four Irish Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds,* 32.

century."[36] Another change happened in 1892, according to Thomas Shea, when Standish Hayes O'Grady's *Silva Gadelica* made Finn's cycle accessible to "to the majority of Irishmen who had not yet learned their own language."[37]

We can assume that with his moralizing mission, Trellis was hoping for the Finn of the "learned" tradition, but what he got instead was the more comic and burlesque Finn of the oral tradition. Trellis learns this lesson the hard way when Finn assaults the very girl whose virtue he is supposed to protect. The primary reason why Finn fails as the moral center of Trellis's novel, however, is that he is incapable of making a connection with the other characters who merely see the legendary warrior as "a terrible man for talk." Finn's tales, while "good stuff, bloody nice," are beyond their more modern experiences.

Thus, in emphasizing the difficulty Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey have in connecting with Finn, O'Brien also shows that there is no such thing as true cultural hegemony; members of a community could

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[36] Gerard Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Three Candles, 1961), 19. Qtd. in Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 94.

[37] Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 95. Standish Hayes O'Grady should not be confused with Standish James O'Grady, the revivalist historian.

not now, nor could they ever be, represented by one text or one cultural artifact. Instead, a multitude of texts are in play, and these texts often do not overlap, as Kiberd states: "Those who read high modernism have no time for the Bard of Booterstown, and those who enjoy cowboy novels have no knowledge of the *Fiannaíocht*."[38] Consequently, Finn's recitations become more of a purgative for outmoded views of culture. As Shanahan states of the old stories, "they need to come out sometime." And perhaps they do, so that they can relinquish their hold on the construction of national identity.

By contrast, middlebrow culture actually allows these characters a way to connect to the poetry of Finn. When Finn recites Sweeney's song, Shanahan interrupts because he has been reminded of a poem by "the Bard of Booterstown," Jem Casey. Finn's words bring "the thing into (his) head in a rush" (101) and he begins to recite in the same "priest-like" tone as Finn. As Finn ignores the interruption and resumes his tale, Shanahan is obliged to recite another verse, this time a composite of both Finn's and Casey's styles: "Listen man. Listen to this before it's lost. When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the color of bran, when a badger

[38] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 504.

bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN!" (112-113) In Shanahan's hybrid poem, O'Brien shows how myth and its ideological underpinnings may be changed by a community's need to understand them in their own language. Not only does Shanahan alter old Irish poetry to make it relevant to his experience, he also revises Casey's political ode to labor to become a drinking song more palatable to himself and his cronies.

Shanahan and Lamont also alter Sweeney's song, the epic tale of a king banished to the trees, into something with which they can identify more closely, a turn-of-the-century pub tale about a leaping policeman. Unlike Finn's somnambulistic poetic recital, the tale of Sergeant Craddock defending his Irishness against the Gaelic Leaguers in a jumping contest invites the active participation of the listeners:

> What does my sergeant do, do you think, Mr. Shanahan.
> I'm saying nothing, said knowing Shanahan.
> By God you're a wise man. Sergeant Craddock keeps his mouth shut, takes a little run and jumps twenty-four feet six.
> Do you tell me that! cried Furriskey.
> Twenty-four feet six.
> I'm not surprised, said Shanahan in his amazement, I'm not surprised. Go where you like in the wide world, you will always find that the Irishman is looked up to for his jumping. (122)

Sergeant Craddock, like Sweeney, is a man between worlds. The jumping of the Irish "since the early days of the Gaelic League," could refer to their constant need to not only to negotiate between the old and the new Ireland, but also to negotiate between their two cultural heritages: the Irish *and* the English. The argument that inspires Sergeant Craddock to prove his jumping prowess is one about language; accused of not knowing his national tongue, Craddock replies, "I do … I know plenty of English" (120).

This "jumping" between cultures is also shown in an evening at the narrator's house when the uncle and his friends plan their ceilidhe. Their native culture is something new and slightly foreign to them, having lived in a society in which a dance like the waltz is actually "as Irish as the rest of them." That the two cultural enforcers, the Gaelic league and the clergy, are both opposed to the waltz, one on nationalist and the other on moral grounds, requires that the uncle and his friends negotiate and establish a point of order that "a ceilidhe is a ceilidhe. … We have plenty of dances of our own without crossing the road to borrow what we can't wear" (133).

Shanahan and Lamont's insistence on the middlebrow version of Sweeney's tale also foreshadows the two rebellions that occur within the

narrator's novel. Trellis's insistence on authorial control, even as he neglects his characters' cultural lives, drives the characters to attempt to emancipate themselves in the ever-increasing periods when Trellis is asleep. Thus, the incidents at the Red Swan Hotel highlight the potential for proletarian rebellion and the entropy that follows; the rebellion neither fails nor succeeds but instead leads to an acceptance of middlebrow culture and the status quo. Peggy and Furriskey instigate the first rebellion by drugging Trellis so that they can pursue an honest middle-class life running a sweet shop very near the Red Swan.[39] Their escape to the suburbs initially represents a proletarian revolution against the author's despotic capitalism, but the farcical nature of this rebellion tends to undermine the notion of such revolutions, as Booker notes. The only difference is that the workers "now drink their pints of plain from fancier glasses." [40]

This is truly a revolution of the sort Booker describes, as the conversation one social night at the Furriskey household illustrates. The participants in this conversation awkwardly perform the conventions of

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[39] The details of Peggy and Furriskey's rebellion evoke Dairmuid and Grainne's flight from Finn.

[40] Booker, "Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?: The Politics of *At Swim-Two-Birds*."

language and of polite society, but their naive attention to conventions prevents any actual communication from taking place.[41] Abstractions such as laughter and thought become commodities of certain exchange value: "a privy laugh, orderly and undertoned, was offered and accepted in reward" (229) and incidental activities, like the passing of a sugar bowl, take on greater significance and detail. In their attempt to perform their cultural roles correctly, the participants both forget themselves and become self-conscious as to their proper behavior. For example, Lamont asks Furriskey whether or not it is proper to call a "pianoforte" simply a "piano" in an attitude of "civil perplexity" (218).[42] These characters are not only borrowing a language that is not their own, but also operating under a naïve and stereotypical assumption about the nature of high culture. Consequently, they get it wrong, claiming that both Homer and Socrates persecuted the Christians, referring to Paganini as Pegasus, and calling

[41] Gramsci's definition of normative grammar, in which monitoring, teaching and censorship coerce speakers to conform to a community norm explains more clearly why the participants are not quite acting according to convention—and why, instead, convention seems to be acting upon them. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 353-55.

[42] O'Brien also renders the failure of conventions of language to fit the specific population in the surreal recontextualization of common Dublin phrases, such as "paralysis is certainly a nice cup of tea" (228) and "water on the knee is a bad man" (226).

Beethoven's Kreuzer Sonata the "Crutch," which is of such beauty that it makes you "tap the shoe leather right off your feet" (215).[43]

Of course, this conversation underscores a central problem O'Brien faced in his construction of his own intellectual identity within his cultural milieu—the middlebrow. His audience is nostalgic for tradition, but they also enjoy the fruits of modernity. It is an awkward fit, and O'Brien's solution was to conflate traditional stories with their more modern retellings, thus releasing the traditions from their status as artifacts and opening them up to new interpretations and presentations. Thus Sweeney becomes Sergeant Craddock; Diarmuid and Grainne become Peggy and Furriskey. O'Brien engaged in this hybridization of stories not simply to demonstrate "the exile of Ireland from its own past," [44] as Kiberd claims,

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[43] Gramsci sees this tendency for the masses to look outside their culture for heroes and ideals as a desire to deny existing hierarchies and find a more egalitarian system of culture. However, Gramsci also believes, and the taste of the narrator's characters shows, that the non-intellectual classes are moved more by forms that are memorable and deeply felt rather than those forms that are novel or critical (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 373). This aspect of O'Brien's work also invites comparison to Kavanagh's definition of the provincial who "does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—towards which his eyes are turned—has to say." See Patrick Kavanagh, "Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1:7 (May 24, 1952) 1.

[44] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 510.

but instead to show that this melding of various levels of culture was a given fact of contemporary experience.

O'Brien's personal struggle as a writer with the growth of middlebrow culture is also seen in the writing and rewriting of Trellis's trial by Furriskey, Lamont, Shanahan, and Orlick. Orlick, writing on the behalf of the undoubtedly plebeian Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey, chooses not to orient his writing towards their needs, but instead reinvents these characters to be the proper audience for his own attempt at modernist esoterica. Orlick is consistently accused of writing over his audience's heads and thus ignoring their goals:

> I beg your pardon, Sir, said Shanahan, but this is a bit too high up for us. The delay, I mean to say. The fancy stuff, couldn't you leave it out or make it short, Sir? Couldn't you give him a dose of something, give him a varicose vein in the bloody heart and get him out of that bed? ...
> You overlook my artistry, [Orlick] said. You cannot drop a man unless you have first lifted him. See the point?
> Oh, there's that too, of course, said Shanahan (239-40).

Orlick's erudite approach to Trellis's punishment is not so popular with his audience; one of the problems is that Orlick is too faithful to the original Sweeney story, with which Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey are incapable of identifying. Only when the more familiar Pooka replaces

Saint Moling and the setting becomes more urban, caged in by tram wires, does this *ad hoc* reading public engage with the story.

Orlick attempts to compromise with his audience, but cannot lower himself to their level. Following instead his own dictum that you cannot drop a man without first lifting him, he elevates his audience by introducing them as characters within the manuscript and endowing them with the type of facile knowledge that they would find impressive. At first, they are suspicious because they are going to be under yet another writer's control in the story:

> Wait a minute, he said. Just a minute now. Not so fast. What's that you said Sir?
> Mr. Paul Shanahan, he said slowly, the eminent philosopher, wit and raconteur...
> What's wrong with you man, [Furriskey] asked . . . Isn't it high praise? Do you know the meaning of that last word?
> It's from the French, of course, said Shanahan.
> Then I'll tell you what it means. It means you're all right. Do you understand me? I've met this man. I know him. I think he's all right. Do you see it now? (268)

Orlick eventually finds the right balance by appealing to his audience's parochial sense of class and education. They have an intellectual discussion covering many academic subjects, but there is one piece of information that finally connects with Orlick's audience: "It was then that Mr. Furriskey surprised and indeed, delighted his companions … by a

little act which at once demonstrated his resource and his generous urge to spread enlightenment. … How to read the gas-meter, he announced" (276). Orlick's rather cynical move is to present a practical skill that he assumes would be more palatable to his middle-class audience than would more esoteric ideas.

When Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey all take their own turns at writing, the process takes a back seat to result, and violence replaces artistry. Their focus is specific and pragmatic; they want the greatest revenge in the most expeditious way possible. Having been, like Finn, at the mercy of a "story teller's book web," the revenge they construct for Trellis places him in a narrative situation over which he has no self-determination and in which he has no identity of his own:

> What are you now? says the Pooka.
> Only a rat, says the rat, wagging his tail to show he was pleased because he had to and had no choice in the matter. A poor rat, says he. (262-263)

The violence of Trellis's trial would seem to fulfill the narrator's ambiguous assertion that "it would be incorrect to say" that providing characters with a private life, self-determination, and a decent standard of living "would lead to chaos." Trellis's failures to provide these things for his characters leave the nature of the rebellion against him rather

ambiguous as well. Booker claims that *At Swim-Two-Birds* is anti-carnivalesque in that it gives the appearance of riot. *The Wasteland,* he continues, is not carnivalesque for the same reasons.[45] What seems like chaos, then, is actually an assertion of the status quo. Much as the pinnacle of intellectual achievement in Orlick's manuscript is the revelation of how one reads a gas meter, so too are people ready to focus not on social change, but on the pragmatic and everyday. Consequently, the trial highlights the parochial nature of O'Brien's Dublin, the narrator's Dublin, and of the novel itself.

According to Kiberd, *At Swim-Two-Birds* reveals a post-heroic society in which "a people who had once asserted revolution or death now has to cope with the death of the revolution." [46] Kiberd is speaking primarily of the uncle's generation, which has given up their passionate idealism for earnest discussions about whether the waltz is Irish enough for a ceilidhe. The narrator also seems to acquiesce to this way of life when he accepts the gold watch from his uncle. However, neither this antepenultimate ending of the novel nor the penultimate or ultimate

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[45] Booker, "Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?: The Politics of *At Swim-Two-Birds*."

[46] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 514-515.

endings answer any questions about O'Brien's own feelings about what would seem to be an adjustment towards a middle-class and middlebrow Irish identity. Instead, they seem to show that any attempt to bring cohesion to the narrative or the question of identity will ultimately fail.

Despite the novel's three endings and three openings, O'Brien plays with a human desire for a cohesive narrative;[47] he teasingly presents the necessary signposts that readers expect within a novel, only to whisk them away. Not only does the book starts with a Chapter 1 that never gives way to a Chapter 2, the reader is also bombarded with idiosyncratic "typographical boundaries" such as *Extract from my Manuscript, Interjection on the part of Brinsley,* and *Note on Constructional or Argumentative Difficulty.*[48] The administrative dryness of these labels gives the impression that an organizational logic is at work, but this too is deceptive.

The novel not only toys with the expectations readers have for what happens between the covers of a book, but it also denies the integrity of the map of Dublin they hold in their heads. The formal and frequent

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[47] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 511.

[48] Along similar lines, the novel begins on page 9, which might be a reflection of the rule of three, or O'Brien's dictum (also one of the early titles for the work) that "truth is an odd number."

references to Dublin landmarks such as Nelson's Pillar, UCD, and the Antient Concert Rooms— "on what used to be Brunswick, now Pearse Street" (280) —create the illusion of cohesion. The reader is distracted from the fact that the Dublin that the narrator and his uncle actually inhabit is tangential to the story; the real action takes place in a Dublin that exists solely in the narrator's mind. Consequently, all of the landmarks that should have helped the reader progress through the text actually hinder clear navigation and baffle any attempt to secure a clear narrative or geographically sound vision of reality.[49] In its permeable time-space continuum, the novel embraces fragmentation and, as Hassett argues, evokes "shifting temporal and spatial boundaries of the city of the new physics."[50] The primacy of entropy is reflected in the novel's epigraph from *Hercules Furens*that "all things naturally draw apart and give place to one another."

To embrace fragmentation allows for a sort of freedom, however. As Monique Gallagher points out, the novel is a *fabula* in which natural

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[49] Monique Gallagher, "Frontier Instability in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*" in *A Casebook on Flann O'Brien's* At Swim-Two-Birds, ed. Thomas C. Foster [volume online]; available from http://www.centerforbookculture.org/casebooks/casebook_swim/gallagher.html; Internet; accessed 19 December 2003.

[50] Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," 121.

laws are ignored and in which "the time-space limits of normal experience are subverted." [51] This allows the novel to become what the narrator calls "a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" (33). Shea argues that this fragmentation, or breakdown of discursive strategies, allows the act of writing itself to subvert into palimpsest. Specifically, the writing of Orlick, Shanahan, Lamont, Furriskey, and the narrator is not only recreational but also re-creational; beginning, or creating anything at all "means rewriting but, more significantly, it means writing over what has been written before."[52] These false starts and diversions lead to a parody of the effort to "achieve lasting shape with words."[53]

Kiberd feels that this palimpsest, or "trellis-like" structure in which storylines interrupt other storylines before any can be resolved, is possibly a comment on underdevelopment: "The inability to hear or tell a story from start to finish may be a comment on the diminished sense of reality in the world depicted here: its characters seem to have sensations (mostly painful) rather than those experiences that make stories or even growth

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[51] Gallagher, "Frontier Instability in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*."
[52] Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 111
[53] Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 110.

possible."[54] Thus, he continues, the novel could be read as O'Brien's attempt to "glue all the shattered pieces together as best he can."[55] However, the character Trellis and his despotic approach to the novel also represent a misguided attempt to create a false sense of cohesion. In this, the failed infrastructure of the novel reflects the failed infrastructure of the Free State, which has allowed for economic and cultural underdevelopment. This point is underscored in the penultimate ending in which Theresa's burning of the manuscript saves Trellis. The infrastructure of the novel is presented in the guise of Theresa's stays, the function of which is to

> … improve the figure, to conserve corporal discursiveness, to create the illusion of a finely modulated body. If it betray its own presence when fulfilling this task, its purpose must largely fail.
> Ars est celare artem, muttered Trellis, doubtful as to whether he had made a pun. (314)

Both Trellis's and the narrator's novels fail because their structures and their purposes are so transparent. If we read further into this, focusing on Trellis's "doubtful" pun, we could also say that the Free State project of constructing identity also fails because it is transparent. But perhaps the

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[54] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 503. Please see Chapter 1 for a discussion of Kiberd's term, "underdevelopment."

[55] Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism," 502.

failure lies not in the transparency of the project, but that it tries to present the illusion of cohesion—"a finely modulated body "—when the reality is much more fragmentary and hybridized.

***An Béal Bocht* (1941)/ *The Poor Mouth* (1973)**

O'Brien's remapping of familiar Dublin in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to reflect the effects of modernity not only questions the expectations created by literary representation, it also opens up spaces in which national and cultural identity can be negotiated. If modernity had altered the urban milieu, making it both more fragmented and more hybridized, however, would it not have affected the rural as well? In the 1930s, the countryside was threatened by depopulation as rural residents flocked to Dublin, England, Scotland, and North America looking for work. The rural was no longer ideal, but the changes it was undergoing were not reflected in literature. Instead, rural landscapes such as the Gaeltacht remained somehow pure in the literary record.

An Béal Bocht, published in 1941 and translated into English in 1973 as *The Poor Mouth*, is a direct parody of classic Blasket Island biographies such as *The Islandman*, *Twenty-Years-a-Growing*, and *Peig*. The western

Gaeltacht, and especially the Aran and Blasket Islands, were deemed the center of what Michael Collins, in *The Path to Freedom*, calls "native beauty and grace in Irish life." As he writes, the only places to meet with "any traces of the old Irish Civilization " were in the remote South, West, North-West corners of Ireland: "To those places the social side of anglicization was never very easy to penetrate."[56]

These biographies simultaneously chronicled and eulogized the vanishing culture of the Gaeltacht; their funereal tone is best represented in the famous lines from *The Islandman*: "the like of us will never be again." In *The Islandman*, Thomás O'Crohán more specifically depicts the decline of the region in the stages of his life*:* "the savage age" (before 1850s), "the heroic age" (1856-75), and the "age of decline"—which ironically happens to also be the period of the revival. During the revival, language enthusiasts, government inspectors and instructors, and well-heeled Dubliners visited the Gaeltacht to immerse themselves in Gaelic culture. However, the Gaeltacht itself remained economically bereft; a 1908 Commission of Enquiry described the inhabitants of the Gaeltacht as "the wrecks of past racial, religious, agrarian and social storms in Ireland,

[56] Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 125.

and of famine catastrophes." In short, while the Gaeltacht was a cultural treasure, it was also "a serious financial danger to the Nation."[57]

O'Brien grew up in Strabane, near the Gaelic-speaking Rosses, and had often visited the Donegal Gaeltacht. Because of his familiarity with the Gaeltacht, he had an early realization of how the efforts of all of the groups who were enthusiastic about this region had come to impede any possible progress. One of O'Brien's earliest targets was Synge's *The Aran Islands*, which he parodied in the short play *The Bog of Allen* [58] For his longer Gaeltacht-themed work, however, O'Brien chose instead to parody *The Islandman.* His desire to parody the work, he felt, was "the test of great writing—that one considerable work should provoke another." He remarked that he "had scarcely put down this great book" before he was engaged in writing "a companion volume of parody and jeer."[59] While O'Brien appreciated the language and the artistry of the book, however, he felt deeply ambivalent towards its message, which flaunted the

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[57] A. O'Brolchain, "The Economic Problem of the Gaeltacht" in *Saorstát Eireann Official Handbook* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1932), 134-135.

[58] This "wholesome Irish play, racy of the soil" was written for the UCD paper *Comhthrom Féinne* under the pseudonym Samuel Hall. Flann O'Brien, "The Bog of Allen," in *Myles Before Myles*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Paladin, 1989), 40.

[59] Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*. 3 January 1957. Quoted in Cronin, 126.

problem that the Gaeltacht's inhabitants would be unable to enter mainstream Irish life until they lost the very language and tradition that marked them as culturally and morally superior. He additionally claimed to be disturbed by *The Islandman*, and called it "a thing not to be seen or thought about and certainly not to be discussed with strangers."[60]

O'Brien channeled these battling impulses into *An Béal Bocht*. The novel begins with an editor's Foreword invoking one of O'Brien's influences: "I recommend that this book be in every habitation or mansion where love for our country's traditions lives at this hour when, as Standish Hayes O'Grady says, 'the day is drawing to a close and the sweet wee maternal tongue has almost ebbed.'"[61] This statement not only parodies the elegiac tone of the Blasket Island biographies, but it also mocks the treatment of the Gaeltacht and its people as a commodity; cultural experts can frame their experiences and make them suitable for presentation in "habitations and mansions" of those who love tradition. The editor's Preface also parodies this process:

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[60] Ibid. 9 December 1965. Quoted in Cronin, 126.

[61] Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth (An Béal Bocht): A Bad Story About the Hard Life*, ed. and trans. Patrick Powers (London: Flamingo, 1993), 9. Unless otherwise specified, all subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

> This document is presented exactly as it was received it from the author's hand except that much of the original matter has been omitted due to pressure of space and to the fact improper subjects were included in it. Still, material will be available ten-fold if there is demand from the public for the present volume. (7)

Thus, O'Brien is critical of the way in which the preservation impulse also becomes a profit-making one, with material at the ready to meet market demand.

The ethnographic impulse present in the Blasket Island biographies is also seen in the maps that are ubiquitous to the endpapers of these works. These maps, as Sarah McKibben points out, signal the biographies' "link to ethnographic and antiquarian attempts to secure Ireland and the Irish as an object of knowledge firmly under imperial control."[62] These maps show how the Gaeltacht looked to the rest of the world—thoroughly known and mapped, yet also remote; a land that was strange, but held no more secrets. The maps in both *Peig* and *Twenty Years A-Growing*, for example, confine their view to the Blasket Islands and the Dingle Peninsula. The relationship of these islands with Ireland is secured by a small inset of the country, making even this close relationship seem remote. That the Blasket Islands and the Dingle Peninsula are shown in

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[62] Sarah E. McKibben, "*An Béal Bocht*: Mouthing Off at National Identity," *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* 38 (Spring-Summer, 2003), 41.

relation only to Ireland and no other parts of the world also shows the island's isolation from the rest of the world, and perhaps hints at Ireland's distance as well.

This conventional view of the Gaeltacht is reversed in Sean O'Sullivan's map for the 1941 edition of *An Béal Bocht*.[63] O'Sullivan's map, titled *An Doman Mór mar crotear é do muintir Corca Dorca* ("The Big World as seen by the people of Corchadorgha"), instead situates the rest of the world as it radiates outward from Corcadorgha, a very tiny point on the west of Ireland, or more specifically, Bonaparte Coonassa's house in Corcadorgha. Consequently, the reader's cartographic expectations, based as they are on the maps provided in other Island biographies, are baffled by an insistently parochial and idiosyncratic view. According to the description in the novel, Bonaparte's house implausibly overlooks all three Gaeltacht areas: the Donegal region to the right, Connemara in front, and Kerry to the left. In order to have this view, Bonaparte's house must face west. In fact, there is *only* the west— all of the points on the compass point in this direction, creating an ever-inward perspective distorting the

[63] This map is not included with the Patrick Powers translation. All references to the map will be to the following edition: Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Àth Claith: Dolmen, 1964).

way the citizens of Corcadorgha see both Ireland and the rest of the world.

O'Sullivan's map shows not only all of Ireland, but the rest of the world as the people of Corcadorgha understand it. The only places labeled are those with which the people of Corcadorgha might come in contact through immigration, trade, or incarceration. Everything else is *An Coigriche,* which translates to "foreign parts" or "strange places." [64] Having a purely rural mindset, the only urban areas labeled in Ireland are "Cark" and "Blah Cliath" (Dublin), and Sligo, the latter represented by its jail, a stop for many of the Gaeltacht denizens who venture outside of their ken.

The places outside of Ireland that are marked on the map are seen simply as extensions first of the Gaeltacht and second, of Ireland. England is *De Odar Sagd* ("The Other Side") and North America is *Tar Lear* ("Across the Sea"), a land situated in *An Muir Astruag* or, a "Distant Sea." These two places are important because they house deposits of "the sea-divided Gael," so the favored emigrant destinations in Tar Lear—New York,

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[64] Brendan O Hehir, "Flann O'Brien and the Big World," in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England, and the World, Vol. 3: National Images and Stereotypes*, ed. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), 208.

Boston, and Springfield—are the only places marked. The features of these places are also dependent on what comes back to Corcadorgha from the sea-divided Gael; money-orders offices proliferate both land masses.[65] The only export and resource besides Gaels is poteen. Poteen deposits dot the west, and overlap curiously with the origin of the Pratie Hockers' (potato sellers) routes. The poteen deposits and the Pratie Hockers' routes join the Gaeltacht to the Lower Hebrides area of Scotland in accordance with Father Peter O'Leary's 1904 book, *Seadná,*[66] which describes Scotland is the place where men from the Rosses go to carouse.

In its privileging of an imaginative and personal view of history over a factual or geographically accurate one, O'Sullivan's map can be compared to Standish James O'Grady's "Map of Ireland in the Heroic Times" from *History of Ireland, the Heroic Period,* in which the land becomes metaphor for the heroism of the people. O'Sullivan's map similarly makes

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[65] London is also labeled "G.B.S." I'm not sure what this means, but on the legend, it is glossed as "Seoirse Drian Seorge," which seems to be a play on "No freedom without George," or "No freedom without royalty." This saying refers to the Old Gray fellow's fondness for the King of England.

[66] According to Patrick C. Power, this book is of "major importance in modern Gaelic literature." O'Leary, a priest from Cork, insisted on using everyday speech in Gaelic literature and was therefore an influential factor in the development of modern Gaelic writing. See O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth (An Béal Bocht): A Bad Story About the Hard Life*. 127f.

the land a metaphor; the name Corcadorgha, which means approximately "Obscure Tribal-Land," adds to the folkloric quality as well as the ethnographic quality of the map. However, instead of using the metaphor to remove what Foster calls "certain unwelcome and inconvenient Irelands" [67] from the national panorama as revivalists did using O'Grady's map, O'Sullivan's map focuses on these people and their problems. The land is thus a metaphor for difficulty and hardship. Instead of Friends of Cuchulain, O'Sullivan presents the sea-divided Gael. Instead of Tir-na-Nog, we have "Tir fó Tuinn," or "Land Under the Wave," depicted by a drowning man.[68] There are no Sons of Fergus MacRoy, only "The Buoys of Wexford." Significantly also, there are two deposits of "Na Daoine Uaisle," or nobility, which seem to share similar dimensions as the original Pale around Dublin and of the Munster Plantation near Cork, and a deposit of "Lucht Oraiste," or Orangemen, in the North. [69]

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[67] John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993), xvii.

[68] In Celtic lore, Tir-fo-Tuinn is symbolic of fear and perspective.

[69] The novel and the map also both seem to reclaim the northern Gaels, as the Ulster dialect is used in one part of the novel. Old Irish is used as well, perhaps as a comment on the rather narrow Kiltartan dialect favored by the revival.

The map and the novel itself complicate the desire to distill national identity to a level of purity that romanticizes poverty and ignorance and thereby alienates the population. Fittingly, the title of the book has at least two different connotations, both related to the phrase "putting on the poor mouth," which means to tell a story of misfortune in order to gain some favor. The residents of Corkadoragha are more than familiar with the benefits of putting on the poor mouth; the Old Grey Fellow, for example, executes a plan to trick the government inspector by dressing up twelve piglets as children and claiming, for a reward of two dollars a head, that they speak English. In addition, the revival and the Free State government required another poor mouth to be put on, the revisiting of rural culture and its promotion as a national identity. This rural culture had to be of an uncomplicated sort, however, or it ceased to be of value. The people of Corkadoragha learn this painful lesson when they find out why the Gaeligores are no longer interested in them:

1. The tempest of the countryside was too tempestuous.
2. The putridity of the countryside was too putrid.
3. The poverty of the countryside was too poor.
4. The Gaelicism of the countryside was too Gaelic.
5. The tradition of the countryside was too traditional. (50)

In other words, the rural nature of Corkadoragha is too specific and too clearly in decline; it does not allow for generalization or adaptation to a nationalist or revivalist agenda.

Finally, *The Poor Mouth* might be a play on *An Teanga*, the national tongue. During the 1930s, the Free State government was replacing the naturally diverse language with official Irish because their ideas about the purity of the nation relied on it. As Joseph O'Neill states in *Saorstát Eireann Official Handbook*: "if the Irish literature and language and living literature died and the English language and culture were to be in future the sole linguistic medium and shaping force for the Irish race, even the possession of full political freedom could not save the Irish nation from losing its age-long cultural identity."[70] Ironically, Irish was suffering a slow death because of the government's enforcement. Books such as *The Islandman* and the other Gaelic island narratives were published for schools by the government-sponsored publishing house, An Gúm under the auspices of Coiste na Leabhar (the Book Committee), whose aim was

[70] Joseph O'Neill, "The Irish Language and the Linguistic Struggle," in *Saorstát Eireann*, 262.

to evaluate Irish texts and make suggestions to the Board of Education.[71] Because of this bureaucracy, the books chosen tended to be tied to state policy and tended to be grammatically correct, but not very creative or dialectically diverse.[72]

The government control of Irish texts also tended to essentialize Irish identity. According to Niall Sheridan, "All those who cherish Irish for the culture it enshrined are being gradually antagonized by the methods of the revivalists. The intolerance and bigotry displayed by its leaders have alienated all those to whom the language is not a trade."[73] Language propagandists tended to be the same people who approved of book censorship and wanted to ban the "depraved" English Sunday newspapers and, in some cases, foreign dancing, foreign games, and immodest women's clothing. In early 1940, O'Brien wrote a letter to Quidnunc, the author of the "Irishman's Diary" in the *Irish Times* in which he commented that ". . . certain categories of Irish speakers are boors.

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[71] An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann (The Folklore Society of Ireland) was also founded in 1927, which contributed to the publication of Gaelic autobiographies.

[72] Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 89.

[73] Niall Sheridan, *Ireland Today*, (July, 1938), qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 122-123.

They (being men) have nuns' faces, wear bicycle clips continuously, talk in Irish only about *ceist na teanga* and have undue confidence in Irish dancing as a general national prophylactic."[74] In this letter, O'Brien also criticizes the association of the language with an essential Irish identity: "A knowledge of Irish does not necessarily connote adherence to the social, cultural or political philosophies of any other Irish speaker." [75]

The conflation of the Irish language with an essential, and proper Irish identity leads to the belief that the language, the soil, and identity join together into a "mystical relationship" leading to "morality and salvation."[76] In *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh critiques the idea that the peasant, due to his generation from and proximity to the "sub-soil," is the authentic and spiritually pure keeper of Gaelic culture: "Without the peasant base civilization must die, /Unless the clay is in the mouth the singer's singing is useless."[77] He shows instead that the "clayey" peasant

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[74] Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 123. It is interesting to note also that the young girls holding the title scroll of O'Sullivan's map are dressed in traditional step-dancing costumes.

[75] Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 123.

[76] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 124.

[77] Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger* in *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin Adair, 1964), 51.

is at risk of becoming mired in the clay, eventually to become clay himself—the fate young Tarry in *Tarry Flynn* attempts to flee.

This idea of an essential Irish identity is parodied in *The Poor Mouth* in the Old Fellow's assertion that Bonaparte needs to be raised as a child of the ashes. The mother obliges, bringing in soot and dung for young Bonaparte to wallow in so that he might have a proper and lasting Gaelic upbringing: "When everything was arranged, I moved over near the fire and for five hours I became a child in the ashes—a raw youngster growing up according to the old Gaelic tradition" (16). Bonaparte's malodorous immersion in the essence of his Gaelic poverty exaggerates the idea that there is such a thing as an essence of identity to the point that it actually involves an exchange of molecules. O'Brien also explores this idea in his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column:

> The mass of the human body… is made up of the soil where it grows up. The food that nourishes it is the clay, which yields up its salts and substances in the appetising and attractive form of cabbage and beef and spuds. A man born in Ireland and reared here is therefore an Irishman according to far more extreme criteria than the speaking of Gaelic, wearing bicycle clips at dances or winning hand-ball medals. He *is* Ireland.[78]

[78] Myles na Gopaleen, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973), 380.

Here, O'Brien also mocks the idea of an essential Irish identity that precludes any other sort of Irish identity. In this essentialism of Irish identity, the rural exists solely to provide the "human ingredients" for another man who, like the ideal peasant, "does not exist"— the "Rootless exracinate," the "Dublin Man." [79]

In *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Poor Mouth*, O'Brien thus creates and re-maps, respectively, two familiar literary landscapes in order to show that Irish identity is not hegemonic; instead, it is in a constant state of negotiation. As new ideas enter Irish culture and are translated and absorbed by different communities, the culture becomes more and more hybridized. The result is that Irish identity can no longer be presented as essential, but an amalgam of different influences and perspectives.

O'Brien takes the idea of hybrid identities further down to a molecular level in two other novels, the rural *The Third Policeman* and its suburban sequel, *The Dalkey Archive.* In these novels, identity becomes both a scientific and metaphysical proposition rather than simply a literary or cultural one.

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[79] Flann O'Brien, *The Hair of the Dogma,* ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Paladin, 1989), 17.

Chapter 4

Rural Hells and Suburban Heavens: The Metaphysics of Identity in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*

As noted in the previous chapter, the early twentieth century saw a crisis in the literary representation of the city. Was the city a multi-layered, chaotic space, or was it still, in the words of Lewis Mumford, "a man-made replica of the universe"?[1] Rural-born populations moved from regions such as the Gaeltacht to the city and built their own communities, making Dublin feel less like a sleek modern capital and more like a collection of villages.[2] In addition, the suburbs were siphoning off urban populations from both ends of the economic spectrum. Increasing industrialization and new ideas about time and space also changed the perception of the city in a way that writers had not yet the language to express. Many of these new ideas, especially those associated with the new physics, were not easily translated into their particular medium. How

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[1] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), 49. Qtd. in Joseph M. Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," in *The Irish Writer and the City*, Irish Literary Studies, no. 18, ed. Maurice Harmon (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984), 115.

[2] Declan Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism: *At Swim-Two-Birds*" in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000),513.

might one engage the full implications of Einstein's Theory of Relativity in fiction? As scientist George W. Gray notes, "One might as well interpret Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on a saxophone." [3]

The rural experienced no similar crisis of representation. It was generally assumed to be untouched by modernity, and therefore relatively easy to represent using conventional and descriptive conventions. Rural Ireland was in fact experiencing the changes wrought by modernity, however. The Irish rural landscape—long the image of timeless perfection and cohesion—was in fact (if not in fiction) becoming splintered due to emigration, poverty, and the construction of the suburbs. O'Brien parodies problematic representations of the "pure" Gaeltacht in *An Béal Bocht*, portraying instead a region marred by emigration and poverty, and stagnating from the attempts to preserve it as a museum piece.

The landscape of*The Third Policeman* similarly challenges faulty and anachronistic representations of the rural. The novel depicts a landscape literally blown apart by the effects of modernity. In this case, however, O'Brien intends not to parody a particular literary style, but

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[3] Robert B. Downs, *Books That Changed the World* (New York: Mentor, 1965), 186. Qtd. in Joseph M. Hassett, "Flann O'Brien and the Idea of the City," 117.

instead to portray the interaction between modern, cosmopolitan ideas and the parish vernacular and explore how this interaction alters the understanding of both. The rural landscape ultimately explodes, exposing the structures holding the 'ideal' surface of the landscape in uneasy stasis. At the same time, O'Brien also mocks the linguistic and theoretical attempts to explicate these phenomena. In his portrayal of the hapless policeman carefully tending to the beam readings and charcoal feedings of eternity, O'Brien in particular shows how attempts to explicate these phenomena give only the illusion of control.

In this chapter, I discuss how in *The Third Policeman* and its suburban sequel, *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Brien both shows the effects of modernity on underrepresented landscapes, and in doing so parodies the misunderstandings and misuses that attend new scientific and metaphysical ideas as they are interpreted and adopted into the Irish rural and suburban mainstream. By granting the power of these new ideas to parochial figures—bumbling policemen in *The Third Policeman*, a disaffected civil servant with delusions of grandeur in *The Dalkey Archive*—he shows that all sense of control or power over eternity, providence, or the nature of existence in the hands of fallible humans is,

quite literally, a joke. More importantly, perhaps, these two works further O'Brien's parochial vision as he shows how the misappropriation of cosmopolitan ideas can actually be limiting in that they cause people to distrust their own experience. As Mr. Collopy in *The Hard Life* states, "only people of no experience have theories."[4]

***The Third Policeman* (1940)[5]**

Given that O'Brien's intent for the book, as stated to Longman's, was "the perfectly logical and matter-of- fact treatment of the most brain-staggering imponderables,"[6] he clearly had little patience for linguistic

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[4] Flann O'Brien, *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1961), 34.

[5] Some critics feel that O'Brien never intended to publish *The Third Policeman.* (Brendan O'Hehir, "Flann O'Brien and the Big World," *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England, and the World, Vol. 3: National Images and* Stereotypes, Wolfgang Zach, Heinz Kosok, eds. (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987) 213). The derivative nature of *The Dalkey Archive* and the fact that O'Brien was clearly displeased with *The Third Policeman*, calling it a "bum book" in a 1939 letter to William Saroyan, adds further credence to this belief. (Brian O'Nolan, Letter to William Saroyan, 25 September 1939. Cited in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter.* 99). Indeed, *The Third Policeman* was not published until 1967, but O'Brien sis send it to Longman's in 1940. Longman's, however, found it too difficult to place. A representative wrote that the company recognized O'Brien's ability, but felt he should be less "fantastic." (Patience Ross, Letter to Brian O'Nolan, 11 March 1940. Cited in *No Laughing Matter.* 101). O'Brien seemed to be attempting to solve this problem in the more prosaic *Dalkey Archive*.

[6] O'Nolan, Letter to Longman's, 1 May 1939. Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 97.

obfuscation. Thus Hopper's assertion that the reimagined parish of *The Third Policeman* should be read as a Foucaultian heterotopia seems slightly inappropriate:

> The parish is a reimagined space between the Celtic twilight zone of Irish folklore and the cosmopolitan center of ideas familiar to Flann O'Brien. The created space is the interface of two seemingly incompatible structures (one real, one projected), each establishing the other through linguistic friction. This juxtaposition of real and fictional idioms simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs our perceptions of language.[7]

The parish of *The Third Policeman* is indeed a reimagined space between two seemingly incompatible structures—one traditional, the other cosmopolitan. In fact, the fictional landscape that O'Brien presents is not that of the Celtic Twilight, but instead that presented in the more regional genre, rural realism. *The Third Policeman*, described by O'Brien as "a very orthodox murder mystery set in a rural district," [8] is set not in the Gaeltacht, or even the west, but in the familiar and somewhat featureless Irish midlands, an area notably free of a mythological or mystical aura. Hopper is also mistaken when he claims that the novel's central conflict—

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[7] Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork UP, 1995), 125.

[8] O'Nolan, Letter to Longman's, 1 May 1939. Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 97.

the friction created by the interaction of real and projected imaginative structures—generates a crisis in both language and representation. In *The Third Policeman,* both structures are projected; neither the rural of the Celtic twilight nor the cosmopolitan ideas explored by O'Brien proves real. Consequently, the resulting crisis in both language and representation is also projected—this world is entirely of the narrator's making. O'Brien makes it clear that the narrator's inability to trust his own experience and his reliance on questionable authorities actually limits his understanding.

O'Brien's choice of source material about Einsteinian physics was in turn distinctly parochial. He used two works written for a popular audience interested in the Theory of Relativity: J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927) and *The Serial Universe* (1934). One of Dunne's theories from the former work informs the structure of *The Third Policeman* in multiple ways. Dunne posits that in waking life, people move blindly in only one dimension. Thus, what we perceive as existence is really only the visible world, or just the surface of what is possible. Only in dreams or after death are we able to transcend the visible world and travel in all dimensions.

In the first chapter of *The Third Policeman,* O'Brien similarly depicts the one-dimensional world in which people are trapped in their waking lives. The narrative thread of this chapter is conventional and linear, allowing movement in only one direction through the text, as in a typical rural realist novel. The nameless narrator seems to move blindly, or is moved blindly, through the narrative as well. The limits of his trajectory affect his identity; similar to the characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* who are spawned by aestho-autogamy, the narrator springs up, fully formed, with only vague memories of his development but no experiences to show for it. All of the narrator's actions are marked by passivity and a lack of recognition. He was born "a long time ago" and his memories of his parents include only vague recollections of such things as his father's murmurings to his dog and his mother's red face. Their deaths pass, and he reaps the monetary benefit of his father's planning only with the recognition that "I thought he was a generous man to do that for a boy he did not know well."[9] Even the accident in which he loses his leg is described in the passive voice; he had his leg broken "for him."

[9] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (New York: Plume, 1967), 9. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

Further exploring the implications of Dunne's theory, O'Brien shifts the narrator's perception after his death. This shift takes place in the second chapter, when modernity and tradition literally collide in the detonation of the black box. The resulting explosion fragments both the rural landscape and the rural genre, exposing the tenuous and artificial stasis in which each is held. Here, too, law and order prevail over chaos in only a very artificial way; the creaks of the scaffolding holding entropy at bay can very literally be heard throughout the novel as the parish universe, post explosion, endlessly expands and contracts.

Now that the narrator has transcended the visible world, he can see all facets of objects at once, discerning depth where none existed before and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of depth where it had once been perceived. The landscape now seems like an accordion; the narrator is able to see not only the surface of objects, but everything hidden underneath and between those objects as well. Consequently, the narrator reports that the surface of the landscape seems "real and incontrovertible" (86). Upon closer inspection, however, a scene of pastoral industry—"tiny people stooped at their turf work"—becomes uncanny in its artifice:

> My surroundings had a strangeness of a peculiar kind, entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has

> never been before. Everything seemed almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made. Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing or of being confused with it. (39)

Not only is the landscape exceptional in that it is exceedingly *un*exceptional and familiar, but it becomes clear that it is made up of discrete components that maintain integrity, even as the post-explosion universe expands and contracts. As a result of its stasis, the landscape suffers a kind of beautiful underdevelopment: "Nothing had grown or matured and nothing begun had yet been finished" (143).

The narrator's new vision also affects how he sees the buildings that are a part of the parish landscape. These buildings fall into two categories—those that seem organic to the landscape and those that appear to be parasitic and unnatural aberrations. Gogarty's outhouse, for example, is an organic structure, appearing in perfect and tiny detail on the map of the parish etched eternally onto the ceiling of the police barracks. The other organic structures are the big house belonging to Mathers, Divney's farmhouse, and the ecclesiastical portal to eternity. These buildings maintain their integrity despite the explosion and the intrusion into the text of de Selby's belief that houses are "necessary evils," wrongly enclosing and disrupting space.

The other buildings in the landscape–police barracks, notably — were not visible in the pre-explosion world and have only become visible to the narrator now that he is in the world of the dead. Framed by the tense perfection of the landscape, the barracks of Pluck and MacCruiskeen lacks depth, or what the narrator later describes as "the essential quality of all known objects" (135):

> I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the reminder … At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it … I gathered this from the fact that I seemed to see the front and the back of the 'building' simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. (53)

As a result, something as common to the real rural Irish landscape as police barracks are rendered completely foreign.

While the narrator's ability to see all facets of an object at once should bring clarity, it instead creates dissonance, and in turn, a sense of distrust and dread. The façade of the barracks "looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and had indeed been very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not

deceive a child" (52). The vision of the barracks is appalling because its integrity is called into question; a building that should represent a solid maintenance of law and order in the landscape is exposed to be simply a prop. Later in the novel, the improbable nature of the police barracks becomes emblematic of the illusion of order afforded by the policemen. The narrator's encounter with the barracks is the first inkling that all sense of control or power over eternity in the hands of bungling and fallible humans is, quite literally, a joke.

The second police barracks, which belongs to Policeman Fox, is more troubling. At the very least, it is a rogue police station, allegedly doing official business entirely off of the grid.[10] It is parasitic, built entirely within the walls of Mather's house to save on taxes, as Fox explains.[11] In many ways, the purpose of this station is not to maintain order, but to dispense the illusion of order. For the same reason, the narrator relies on

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[10] Policeman Fox, the third policeman of the title, is also established as a rogue policeman who "never interrogates the public and … is always taking notes" (77).

[11] Here is where Hopper's Foucaultian reading is apt; these two seemingly incompatible buildings are brought into existence by their reliance on the ideology represented by the other. The police barracks represents order and exist to protect the place of the big house in the social order; the big house represents a social order that engenders class struggle.

the ideas of the mad scientist de Selby in order to make sense of the chaotic landscape he now finds himself within. Many of de Selby's ideas are a parody of Dunne's. Dunne's proposition that people are trapped in one dimension in the waking world, for example, is mirrored in de Selby's hypothesis that the universe is sausage-shaped rather than spherical. If a way could be found to travel down the "barrel" of the sausage, de Selby theorizes, "a world of entirely new sensation and experience will be open to humanity" (95). Ironically, while de Selby's theory ostensibly expands the realm of possible experience, it proves to be very limiting; as in Dunne's theory, death is "nearly always present when the new direction is discovered" (95). The interaction between Dunne and de Selby's ideas are important to *The Third Policeman* because they represent how sound ideas, such as the Theory of Relativity, can be warped when translated into the vernacular. De Selby's ideas take the warping process begun by Dunne even further, mistranslating scientific ideas in order to explain entirely unrelated phenomena.

Most of de Selby's irregular ideas result from his inability to make rational connections between moments of sensory experience. As a result, his life becomes a hallucination, a "succession of static experiences, each

infinitely brief" (50). The effect is similar to looking a strip of film, frame by frame, and assuming that it would be screened in the same way. Taking bits of discrete knowledge as literal truth and trying to fix them as such, de Selby fails, as does the narrator, to graduate from mere consciousness to reason. In this way, De Selby's outrageous theories represent O'Brien's own jaundiced view of certain forms of knowledge. His opinion on theoretical science is presented in the narrator's statement that "[i]t is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated . . . while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena" (52). This implementation of ideas at the expense of experience or common sense attracts the lion's share of O'Brien's vitriol in the novel. This can be seen most clearly in the portrayal of both the narrator and of de Selby's commentators.

The narrator exemplifies Kavanagh's definition of the provincial mindset; he has "no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—towards which his eyes are

turned—has to say."[12] It is only in retrospect that the narrator is able to articulate how his own sense of identity depends entirely on his attachment to the identity of others—Divney, and, most significantly, the mad scientist de Selby. The moment at which the narrator believes his life really begins is the day he encounters the mysterious scientist in a science master's book. Indeed, the narrator remembers that day "more readily than I do my birthday" (9). Due to his single-minded devotion to de Selby, the narrator commits both "his first serious sin" and "his greatest sin," the murder of Mathers. He undertakes this act entirely without conscience, as seen in his ambiguous statement identifying Mathers as "the man I had murdered without question" (25).

The violence the narrator is willing to perpetrate in service to de Selby is echoed by the squabbling commentators whose antics animate the footnotes sprawling throughout the novel. The footnotes, touching on the issues of roads, housing, travel, education, and the physical properties of reality, ostensibly provide authoritative support for the narrator's attempt to puzzle out experience. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that their primary topic is not the theories of de Selby, but

[12] Patrick Kavanagh, "Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat," in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1:7 (May 24, 1952).

instead the petty battles and, at times, armed conflict that takes place between de Selby's commentators in the pursuit of their subject. The commentators fight for authoritative supremacy and authenticity rather than comprehension and clarification of de Selby's ideas as one scuffle over de Selby's wholly illegible 'Codex' illustrates: "Attempts made by different commentators to decipher certain passages … have been characterized by fantastic divergencies, not in the meaning of the passage (of which there is no question) but in the brand of nonsense which is evolved" (145).

The "great hatred, little room" of the footnote universe escalates, reaching a climax with the commentator Hatchjaw's heavily armed journey to Germany: "Probably no private traveller has ever gone abroad accompanied by a more formidable armoury" (171). At this point, the footnotes take over the text of the novel, and the already shaky line between the two narrative threads almost entirely disappears. This obliteration of a clear narrative illustrates O'Brien's own understanding of the difference between provincialism and parochialism. The commentators are clearly provincial, battling not for any authentic

understanding of experience, but instead for recognition within their petty domain.

The appreciation the commentators and the narrator have for de Selby might serve a more metaphysical purpose as well, however, in that it allows these philosophers one subject they can truly master—futility. Both the narrator and the commentators admit their distrust of de Selby's theories, which attempt to explain phenomenon that are unknowable to humankind. One of the commentators, du Garbandier, states that "the beauty of reading a page of de Selby is that it leads one inescapably to the happy conviction that one is not, of all nincompoops, the greatest" (92). In his absurdity, de Selby confirms that many things are, in fact, truly unknowable. De Selby's failure to explicate these phenomena gives his work a "humanising urbanity" and he becomes a wholly knowable subject within a realm of uncertainty (92).

Much as de Selby's attempts to explain experience only verify that much of it remains unknowable, the eternal policemen Pluck, MacCruiskeen, and Fox similarly serve as the tenuous blue line between chaos and order in the parish universe of *The Third Policeman*. Their jurisdiction is both more expansive and more invasive than a regular

parish policeman, whose role could also be described as both central and ambiguous.[13] The eternal policemen attempt to regulate time, space, and the molecular purity, or identity of their constituents in order to maintain the status quo within the parish. The policemen of the novel are intimately involved with each member of the parish from birth. According to legend, they have the power of "wind watching," or being able to ascertain the length of a person's life from the color of wind prevailing at that person's birth. Every year until a person's death, the police give the person another gown the same color as their wind. What should be miraculous, however, is domesticated and made banal by the policemen's bureaucratic drive to maintain order; they refuse to release all of the gowns at once "on the ground that the general ascertainment of death-days would be contrary to the public interest" (35).[14]

Apart from the "breaches of the peace" they feel will occur if people have a sense of their own destinies, the policemen also fear miscegenation. Their fear is expressed in Pluck's Atomic Theory, an overly

[13] Historically, the police have dispensed famine relief and other forms of aid and comfort; however, they have also put down agrarian rebellions and presided over evictions.

[14] In turn, the narrator fails to appreciate the beauty and miracle of the policeman's power, thinking simply that "if they knew so much" they could help him find his black box.

literal interpretation of John Dalton's Atomic Theory, which states that everything is made up of atoms that are constantly in motion.[15] In Pluck's translation of Dalton's theory, a sheep, for example, is nothing but "only millions of tiny bits of sheepness whirling around and doing intricate convolutions inside the sheep" (48). Still following Dalton, Pluck explains that these bits of sheepness can not suddenly become bits of something else. Rather, through repeated collisions with other atoms, they can form hybrids.

In the parish of *The Third Policeman*, the pool of available atoms that can combine with each other to form hybrids is limited to the stock features of a rural parish: people, horses, soil, and bicycles:

> The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycles as a result of the interchanging of atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who are nearly half people and half bicycles. (85)

Hence, the revival cliché that Irish identity is inextricably bound to the soil is taken to an absurd length— it is fused with *all* the accoutrements of

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[15] In some ways, John Dalton is the antithesis of the policemen; his realm is science, theirs mythology. Interestingly, Dalton was a meteorologist, interested in trade winds. He was also color blind, and although his research in this area was discredited during his lifetime, "Daltonism" became a common term for color blindness.

parish life. On the one hand, this exchange can be a good thing; according to Pluck, "it puts iron into you" (90). On the other, however, the repeated and unavoidable collisions between these elements results in hybrids that are even more ensconced in the parish. Those who walk too far, for example, are at an even greater risk, for "too much walking fills you up with clay . . . (or buries bits of you along the road) and brings your death halfway to meet you" (90).[16]

Notably, all of the dangerous exchanges of molecules are tied specifically to transportation. As a result, "it is not easy to know what is the best way to move yourself from one place to another" (90) and it is preferable to not travel much at all. Walking and riding a horse have their own dangers, but the main concern for Pluck is the bicycle, an object that defines the scope of the parish. As Patrick Kavanagh states in *Studies in the Technique of Poetry*:

> …my cultural parish was certain hills that I could se from my own hills. The ordinary bicycle did not change these dimensions, for though one seldom explores the full extent of one's parish on foot, one could and did so on bicycle. And those bicycle journeys that I

[16] O'Brien's satirical predicament of returning to the clay before one's rightful time evokes Kavanagh's peasant ploughman in *The Great Hunger* who is "half a vegetable."

> made to the limits of my kingdom were the greatest adventures of my life.[17]

The bicycle is also tied to the economic state of the parish; in some ways, the parish is reliant on a certain economic parity and immobility for its cohesion. As Kavanagh points out, "[t]he coming of the motor car on a large scale is what broke open the confident enclosure of the parish." [18] O'Brien comments on this is well, as Pluck explains that the only people in the parish free of the danger of mixing with bicycles are the ones who have to share their bicycle with others: "Some people never know how fortunate they are when they are poorer than each other" (88).

The problems posed by the mixing of the bicycles and the people of the parish are both moral and civic in nature, as are the threats that face any community on the threshold of change. The major moral problem, according to Pluck, is that male bicycles often pose as female bicycles in order to trick women into riding them. As O'Brien points out in his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column: "[The bicycle] is the only vehicle I can think of

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[17] Kavanagh, Patrick "Studies in the Technique of Poetry: Extracts from 10 Lectures," in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1986) 243.

[18] Ibid.

to which man has deigned to concede the attribute of sex."[19] Comical as the concern is, it nonetheless shows a fear of loosened values that come with the effects of modernization. In another "Cruiskeen Lawn" column in 1943, O'Brien criticizes the belief in a "mystical relationship" between "the Irish jig, the Irish language, [and] abstinence from alcohol, morality, and salvation" as the impetus for a fear of outside influences such as jazz music and dancing.[20] Thus, Pluck's commending the poorer people of the parish for their "luck" atbeing poor and therefore pure evokes how the revival made an aesthetic out of rural poverty.

The civic problems that arise from the situation involve the voting rights of this previously disenfranchised group and how their special interests might alter the status quo: "If you let it go too far it would be the end of everything. You would have bicycles wanting votes and they would get seats on the County Council and make the roads far worse than they are for their own ulterior motivation" (90). In *The Dalkey Archive*, the already "monstrous exchange of tissue for metal" takes on a note of treason because, as the character Mick explains, most bicycles are

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[19] Flann O'Brien, *The Hair of the Dogma*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Paladin, 1989), 125.

[20] Myles na gCopaleen, "Cruiskeen Lawn," 15 March 1943. Qtd. in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 124.

manufactured in Birmingham or Coventry.[21] Nonetheless, the problem is strictly parochial—a concern for neither the National Schools nor even the family, Pluck states, but for the County Council. Thus it is the parish policeman's duty to keep the identity of people and bicycles in the parish sorted out and maintain the status quo, even if they have to resort to theft to do it.

Another way the policemen assert control over the identity of their parishioners is through naming. In *The Third Policeman*, a name is treated as a map of a person, reflecting physical characteristics, provenance, and official status. Much as roads bring order to a landscape, so do names bring order to each individual's identity, allowing them to be placed within systems of knowledge. Naming is limiting, too, however; the policeman, for example, engage in a form of profiling, limiting all the possible names the narrator could have to names that only a white man, more specifically an Irishman, could have: "… only a black man could have a name different from the ones I have recited. Or a red man" (101).

Naming also establishes genealogy, providing a person's rightful place in the parish universe. Much like the Good Fairy's desire to place

[21] Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (1964; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993) 88. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

Sweeney in a family of standing in order to better understand him, so does Sergeant Pluck attempt to fabricate a provenance for the narrator that places him on the known map of the parish: "I was once acquainted with a tall man . . . that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and heir to his nullity and all his nothings. What way is your pop today and where is he?" (56-57). That the son of a man who also had no name would inherit the man's "nothings" brings up another purpose of a name—civic business. Without a name, "how could you execute an important bank document?" Not having a name, the narrator is "invisible to the law," (101) and subject to the benefits and costs associated with anonymity: "If you have no name, you possess nothing and you do not exist … on the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you" (61-62).

A disadvantage to having no name, however, is that there is no protection from the law, especially in a system in which the policemen argue that with no name "we can take you and hang the life out of you . . . and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death . . . only an insanitary abstraction in the back yard" (102). Much harm can be done in the name of public interest when a

shaky knowledge base fails, exposing the core of ignorance and fear underneath. Thus Policeman Pluck's explanation to the narrator of why he is being charged with a second murder is crucial, as it again shows the undercurrent of fear and ignorance in a bald assumption of power: "You must recollect that to turn everything to your advantage is one of the regulations of true wisdom . . . it is the following of this rule on my part that makes you a murderer this today evening. . . . It is the way we work in this part of the country" (98).

O'Brien portrays the policemen as the keepers of identity, and therefore as both a parochial fixture and a metaphysical presence. They are a hybrid of disparate forces; Hopper calls them "the resultant interface of several intertextual worlds—the plodding, lumbering policeman from James Stephen's novels and mythic, mystical creatures from the Celtic tradition—a potent fusion of the banal, the literary, and the supernatural."[22] The dissonance that the narrator feels when he first encounters Pluck is the result of this intertextuality. A familiar literary figure, especially in the rural realist novel in which that the narrator finds

[22] Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 133.

himself, Pluck is made strange, and even terrifying, when seen through the narrator's enhanced vision:

> Again, I find it difficult to convey the precise reason why my eyes found his shape unprecedented and unfamiliar. He was very big and fat and the hair which strayed abundantly about the back of his bulging neck was straw-colour; all that was striking but not unheard of. My glance ran over his great back, the thick arms and legs encased in the rough blue uniform. Ordinary enough as each part of him looked by itself, they all seemed to create together, by some undetectable discrepancy in association or proportion, a very disquieting impression of unnaturalness, amounting almost to what was horrible and monstrous (54).

The narrator's encounter with Pluck is similar to the description of Finn in *At Swim-Two-Birds* in its mixture of a familiar image with the hyperbole of the grotesque. Just like Finn, these policemen are figures from legend or literature that have been given powers beyond their understanding. While Finn is rendered harmless in his new role, however, the policemen are potentially deadly. They wield a power that they are incapable of comprehending.

The policemen's failure to understand the power they wield never leads to cataclysm or true chaos, however. Instead, it simply narrows the universe in which they exist. Their inability to understand the size of eternity, for example, severely limits it:

> 'How big is all this place?'

> 'It has no size at all,' the sergeant explained, 'because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality.' (133)

The narrator, on the other hand, attempts to discern the size and shape of eternity using a particularly parochial method: "Could you not bring your bicycle and ride through all of it and see it all and draw a chart?" (134)

According to Vico, humans can only understand what they have created, so humans create a vision of what they cannot understand. Thus, both the policemen and the narrator envision eternity in the way that they can understand it. Pluck and MacCruiskeen's assessment of eternity, for example, is based in purely personal and banal terms: "The beard does not grow and if you are fed you do not get hungry and if you are hungry you don't get hungrier. Your pipe will smoke all day and will still be full and a glass of whiskey will still be there no matter how much of it you drink…" (133).

The absurdity of this idiosyncratic and parochial use of awesome power strikes the narrator when Fox returns the black box. Fox has used the omnium in the box for astoundingly prosaic tasks: wallpapering his barracks, boiling eggs, removing muck from his shoes, and playing pranks

on the other policemen. The narrator is dumbfounded by this apparent misuse of power:

> If I could believe him he had been sitting in this room presiding at four ounces of this inutterable substance, calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery to delude the other policemen, interfering drastically with time to make them think they had been leading their magical lives for years, bewildering, horrifying, and enchanting the whole countryside. (188)

Because he thought only to use the omnium to remove muck from his shoes, and not "to have no muck anywhere at any time," the narrator feels Fox "was not the sort of person to be entrusted with the contents of the black box" (190). But the taste of such power is capable of corrupting the narrator as well; all at once, he desires to "destroy, alter, and improve the universe at will" including publishing volumes of de Selby's works and bringing de Selby back to life to advise him in his "sublime undertakings." But even this never leads to cataclysm; instead, the narrator is merely doomed to constantly traverse a hell literally of his own making.

Hell is thus constructed of both the narrator's and the policemen's inability to comprehend eternity's true nature. Their failure to examine experience prevents them from seeing the patterns that are apparent only to Joe, the narrator's conscience:

> [Joe] said it was again the beginning of the unfinished, the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered. Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable. (200)[23]

Joe appears only after the narrator enters the world of the dead, and he acts not so much as a guide as he does a commentator, providing a common-sense view of an unreal situation. Joe is possibly the one voice that can be taken to be true to O'Brien's own, representing a politely catholic and middle-class interest in the variety of ideas offered in this universe, from the legend of the wind-watching policeman to Pluck's Atomic Theory.[24]

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[23] Joe's descriptions of eternity and hell are not in the final version of the novel. However, he remains the mouthpiece for O'Brien's Thomist Catholic beliefs, in particular the belief that the only good is salvation and the only bad is damnation. According to Cronin, O'Brien felt that "Though meliorations of the human condition may be looked for, perhaps even, within limits, actively sought or encouraged, they must be strictly subordinate to the primary end of existence." Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 104.

[24] Joe also translates the heady ideas implicitly at play in the novel-- Thomist Catholicism, Vico, and Hegel-- into vernacular form explaining not only the nature of hell but also the soul:

> I am your soul and all your souls . . . Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him. Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding ring . . . When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what you are—I take all your significance and importance and all the accumulations of human instincts and appetite and wisdom and dignity. (119-120)

Just as the narrator becomes aware of Joe only after he enters the world of the dead, so too does the narrator sense the presence of Providence only after his death: "the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it" (53). The key word in the narrator's statement is *pretend;* O'Brien's emphasis is that Providence is divine, and thus unknowable to humankind.

The narrator is doomed to live his hell over and over again because his knowledge is powerless against it. Consequently, *The Third Policeman* presents a criticism not simply of secular knowledge, but also of the uses of secular knowledge. Philosophy and science are a joke because their practitioners pretend to "hold out a hope" that they can, through their enquiries, reveal something about the mysteries of existence or that they can affect the balance of good and evil. While they believe their adoption of these ideas broadens their experiences, however, their misunderstanding of the ideas ultimately proves to be limiting. O'Brien continues to explore this idea in *The Dalkey Archive* as Mick, the protagonist of the novel, actively tries to fight Providence and fails. The

cause of his failure is his hubris in believing he, a simple civil servant, can save the world.

The Dalkey Archive **(1964)**

Perhaps because they signify destiny or perhaps because they provide a clear path through the fragmented landscape, roads take on a great significance in *The Third Policeman.* At their most literal, roads bring order to a landscape; a landscape without a road is unusable, as the narrator says of the road he travels between Mather's house and the police barracks:

> I found it hard to think of a time when there was no road there because the trees and the tall hills and the fine views of bogland had been arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made when looked at from the road. Without a road to have them looked at from they would have a somewhat aimless if not a futile aspect (*TP* 37).

In its literal sense, a road also brings aesthetic order to the landscape, creating a narrative out of its features and a way of reading the landscape. A road's linearity also illuminates an individual's personal destiny, especially in unknown or chaotic landscapes: "your own road will always be discernible for its own self and will lead you safely out of the tangled

town" (*TP* 38). The designation of "your road" highlights the link to Providence, or a metaphysical narrative thread; just as each character has a trajectory within a novel, it might be assumed that each individual has a particular road that they travel in life.

In deliberate contrast, the description of Dalkey at the opening of *The Dalkey Archive* is informed by streets that seem to lack what *The Third Policeman*'s de Selby would call "a sense of destiny." These streets are "narrow, not quite self-evident as streets and with meetings that seem accidental" (7). As a result, the portentous naming of the Vico Road, a "dull, lane-like way," seems ridiculous: "Is there to be recalled in this magnificence a certain philosopher's pattern of man's lot on earth—thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos? Hardly" (7).

Dalkey is, after all, an "unlikely" town, twelve miles south of Dublin, "which must, a traveller feels, be next door to some place of the first importance and distinction" (7). The lack of literary representations of places like Dalkey bears out the prevalence of this belief. An amalgam of various forces, this suburban town's controlling idea is hybridity. Built on fragmentation, the suburban town has not suffered the same crises as the rural or the urban; therefore is unlikely to be the idealized subject of

literature or national ideology as the rural or urban has been. But O'Brien's description of Dalkey as insignificant in relation to the more recognizable rural and urban setting is disingenuous; Dalkey is an "unlikely" but thriving combination of rural and urban, traditional and modern.

Charged with presenting the city post-Einstein, an urban archivist such as Joyce subsequently relies on a destructive "confusion of thought and language." It would be somewhat inappropriate to represent the suburban with a "confusion of thought and language," though; linearity and descriptive clarity instead are more suited to the task. Consequently, *The Dalkey Archive* is purposefully explicit and linear.[25] Much of the prose teeters on the edge of banality; it seems to be lifted wholesale from train tables and travel brochures, such as this passage describing Skerries as "a small, pretty watering-place twenty miles north of Dublin with an ample, sandy strand very safe for youngsters, a spot for deep-sea swimmers on a rocky headland, and round the corner a neat little harbour" (104). It is as if

[25] The deliberate flatness of the novel is also one of main criticisms against the book. Anthony Cronin describes it as a "traditional novel, flatulently composed" and lacking in the usual creativity and carefully composed language of O'Brien's other works. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter,* 231.

the banality of setting itself has the power to neutralize all possible crises, whether they are ideological, cultural, or atomic.

As a consequence, the potential for anything new to enter this world and disrupt the trajectory of the status quo has been lost. This idea is most clearly explained in narrator's questioning whether the Vico Road reflects "man's lot on earth" (7). The pattern of man's lot in life as presented here—"thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos"—is also a hybrid, but of ideas; Vico's theory of historical change is presented in the language of Hegel's dialectic. Vico saw humanity following a recurring cycle of barbarism, heroism, and reason. At the end of each cycle is chaos, from which the next cycle is born. That no chaos actually ensues in *The Dalkey Archive*, despite the multiple opportunities for it to erupt, appears to be a criticism again of trusting in a materialist ideology to reveal truths about the mysteries of existence or to affect change in the natural order.

As a Thomist Catholic, O'Brien believed that all of the questions had already been answered, and any attempt to affect their outcome, such as the balance of good and evil in the universe, was futile.[26] Mick, the protagonist of *The Dalkey Archive*, is challenged to learn this complicated

[26] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 104.

lesson. Although he sets out to save the world from a dangerous idea, the idea itself is not harmful until it is given the power that comes with blind dedication. Mick's ever-building obsession with the idea soon turns to hubris, which changes his intent in saving the world to bettering his own lot in life.

Mick, similar to the nameless narrator of *The Third Policeman,* is also guided in part by a scientist named De Selby. In *The Dalkey Archive*, De Selby is no longer an abstraction whose surreal ideas intrude on the logical and structural integrity of the text; instead, he is an active character, interacting with other characters and serving as a catalyst for the main thrust of the plot. One thing the two De Selbys do have in common, however, is their refusal to accept what the narrator in *The Third Policeman* calls "the most obvious realities" (*TP* 52). De Selby doubts science and philosophy, especially the theories of Einstein and Descartes, asking "where are we with this mess of Cartesian methodology and Biblical myth-making?" (15). Unlike the de Selby of *The Third Policeman*, however, he does not offer any alternate theories, only the possibility of destruction. Believing that "the destiny of mankind is extermination," he

has created D.M.P., a compound that can alter time and space and bring about the destiny he envisions.[27]

Mick's friend Hackett provides a Vichean argument for why De Selby has no right to destroy the world; De Selby cannot destroy something he did not make. In turn, De Selby's reply is Manichean; he assumes the precedence of Christian dogma, even as he reverses it:

> I also accepted as a fact the story of the awesome encounter between God and the rebel Lucifer. But I was undecided for many years as to the outcome of the encounter. I had little to corroborate the revelation that God had triumphed and banished Lucifer to hell forever. For if—I repeat *if*—the decision had gone the other way and God had been vanquished, who but Lucifer would be certain to put about the other and opposite story. (22)

The D.M.P. is not what makes De Selby dangerous; instead, there is much more danger in his presumption to a power that he cannot rationally possess. Accordingly, De Selby's most egregious error in a Christian sense is that he no longer needs faith to believe in the things he once hoped for corroboration on; instead, "he *knows*" (109).

De Selby acquires his heretical knowledge by tampering with time and space, detonating the D.M.P. in a cave underneath Dalkey so that he

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[27] D.M.P. stands for Dublin Metropolitan Police. Though De Selby claims that the name is "just a whim," it refers to the policemen of *The Third Policeman* and their perceived control over time and space.

can bring figures down from heaven to talk with him. The primary figure he talks with is Augustine, a misanthropic Irishman and misunderstood civil servant. Augustine feeds De Selby's religious cynicism by exposing the hypocrisy of other key figures in the church, such as Loyola, Francis Xavier, the Jesuits, and the cult of Saint Patrick. In De Selby's discourse with Augustine, a key figure in Thomist Catholicism, O'Brien seems to be voicing some of his own doubts about his faith. De Selby asks the questions most posed about Thomist doctrine, specifically how and why man retains free will, and how there can be predestination if Godsincerely desires the salvation of all men. [28] This questioning never becomes truly subversive, however, as it always presumes that there is something to be reverent about. Despite all of the sniggers at the expense of the Church, as Cronin points out, "there is an assumption that the Catholic Church… affects life and one's outlook on life in enormously important ways."[29]

Mick is similarly cynical towards religion, articulating the equivalence between the dissemination of faith and the dissemination of D.M.P. Both are a form of hygiene, he realizes; missionaries brought one

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[28] *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XIV* edited by Charles G. Herbermann, et al. New York: Robert Appleton Co., c1907-1912. Online Edition ed. Kevin Knight, 2003. Accessed 30 October 2004. http://www.newadvent.com/

[29] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 217.

form of sanitation the parts of the word they visited, while D.M.P. would bring another (114). By theorizing both faith and De Selby's plan to destroy the world in this way, he minimizes the importance and immediacy of either one. As a result, Father Cobble whom Mick calls upon to help prevent De Selby from disseminating D.M.P. actually helps the scientist puzzle out his distribution dilemma. Father Cobble suggests that he use another venerable Irish institution, the Post Office, to disseminate the substance, a move that Mick sadly feels "was a true anti-climax, considering the grandeur of the threat" (117).[30]

What emerges from Mick's disappointment here—not at failing to prevent De Selby but instead at the banality of the methods used for mass destruction—is that he is actually endeavoring to create, in Hegel's terms, an antithesis to De Selby's thesis of bringing about the world's destruction through D.M.P. Mick is ostensibly trying to save the world, but he, too, is attempting to bring about some form of crisis in order to alter his own local status quo: "Was there not a futility about what was nice and

[30] The act of disseminating a deadly substance through the mail certainly resonates with a reader today. In *The Dalkey Archive*, however, the Post Office might also be a reference to the Easter Rising, through which something new did indeed enter the world. But that was a grand gesture, not simply the random and passionless mailing of tainted letters out into the world.

orderly?" (144) To this end he attempts to embrace a power he cannot rationally possess and attempts another grand gesture in conspiring to bring together De Selby and Joyce to collaborate on a "monstrous earthquake of a book" (153).

Clearly the melding of science and religion failed to bring about changes, but literature might be more effective, especially something in which "might lurk danger to mortals," such as a work by Joyce (103). Perhaps, Mick feels, the power of ideas alone would have the possibility of making even a suburban town like Skerries, where Joyce is reported to be living, a parochial destination for expatriates, allowing for an exile of the mind if not of the body: "yes, perhaps even here again one had silence, exile, and cunning" (105). A more thrilling possibility is that Skerries might be "an ominous sort of place, a social hazard" (104). Joyce, and Skerries by association, disappoint the narrator, however, as Joyce turns out to be rather pedantic and prudish. Joyce has a bit of the persecuted Augustine in him; he claims to have been misunderstood in his desire to simply glorify God. In actuality, he claims, he writes tracts for the Catholic Truth Society and wishes to join the Jesuits in order to reform them from within. The only thing he is able to reform in the end, however, are the

monks undergarments. Again the grand gesture is neutralized to banality as Joyce is indeed taken into the Jesuits, but as a laundry boy.

Despite his dedication to his faith, Joyce is also a slave to materialist ideology in his approach to epistemology and faith. Claiming to be "at sea as to *language*" and unable to communicate ideas clearly in English (due to the fallibility of variations between English, Greek, and Hebrew as vehicles of epistemology), he endeavors instead the "translation into language of raw spiritual concepts" (133). Emphasizing the distinction between *translation* and *exposition*, he is, in his own words, "conveying one thing in terms of another thing which is … em … quite incongruous" (133).

He again privileges a materialist ideology over the Christian dogma that O'Brien embraces as he explains to Mick his theory about the Holy Ghost. He states that belief in the Holy Ghost is all due to a mistranslation from the Bible: "straightforward attention to the word of God will confound all Satanic dribble" (180). Joyce provides a cosmopolitan, intellectual argument, based on an elite knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, for what again is simply a question of faith—man is part God due to the intake of God's *pneuma*. Joyce's theory is in

keeping somewhat with Hegel's belief that man can only grasp the spirit of God because man is himself spirit. However, man can never transcend the flesh and become pure spirit; they can never be dissolved into one. Not only does Joyce make an error of hubris in assuming that he can translate spirit into language, but he also intellectualizes, and thereby destroys "raw spiritual concepts" such as faith by making them something else.

If De Selby supplants God's power in attempting to destroy a world not of his making, and Joyce replaces the Holy Ghost with man, the last figure in the Trinity is Mick, a civil servant who intends to rescue everybody from obliteration just as "Jesus had redeemed all mankind" (119). Mick's Messianic impulses calls to mind another dilemma of dogma—not what if the devil had actually won, but what if Jesus had acted in his own interest? The assumption is that by acting against the designs of Providence, Jesus surely would have brought about the destruction of mankind. Providence, according to Vico, must right the course of history so that humanity is not engulfed in chaos. Mick, however, acts against Providence by stealing the D.M.P. from De Selby's house and locking it away in a safe at the Bank of Ireland. As Hackett

points out to Mick, Mick's desire is to transfer De Selby's power, the D.M.P., to himself. But possessing the means of destruction is not the same as having the power to alternately save or destroy the world.

In the meantime, De Selby's house is destroyed by fire, ensuring that Mick has preserved the means of world destruction for an indeterminate amount of time. In this he has fulfilled De Selby's nihilistic pronouncement that man's destiny is*eventual* extermination. Thus, Mick's machinations only serve to maintain the status quo. Despite the dangers locked away in a vault at the Bank of Ireland, life continues as normal in the suburban landscape. The primacy of middle class life is asserted as Mick announces his intention to get married, and Mary makes an ambiguous statement that also tests Providence: "I am certain I am going to have a baby" (204). In this exchange, a distinction is made between human and divine destiny.

Although he fails in his bid to save the world, Mick does learn something important; he learns that there are many more ways of being than he recognized before. In this, *The Dalkey Archive* continues the conflict between secular humanism and transcendentalism that is central to another of O'Brien's novels, *The Hard Life* (1961). Of the characters in *The*

Hard Life that are a part of this conflict—the commercial entrepreneur Manus, the Victorian-era progressive Mr. Collopy, and the intellectual priest, Father Fahrt—Mr. Collopy, more than even Finbarr, the narrator, is what Cronin calls "the book's informing spirit."[31] Perhaps this is because Mr. Collopy represents a thoughtful synthesis of ideas. Taking to heart his own mantra that "only people of no experience have theories," he has synthesized apparently dissimilar ideologies, dispensed with what he finds distasteful about them, and developed a highly idiosyncratic yet workable personal doctrine.[32]

In *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Brien again seems to treat with subtle kindness the clearly parochial characters that have, like Collopy, also cobbled together their own idiosyncratic melding of faith, folk wisdom, and science. In short, these characters embody polysemy, the melding of the miraculous and the mundane. Despite the naiveté or outright zaniness

[31] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 217.

[32] Flann O'Brien, *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1961), 34.

of many of their ideas, these characters enjoy a certainty and stability that Mick's own life, as tedious and unrewarding as it is, lacks.[33]

The most prominent of these characters is Sergeant Fortrell, a more urban and urbane manifestation of Pluck from *The Third Policeman.* Like Pluck and the other eternal policemen, he serves as the thin blue line between disorder and chaos: "Here one beheld the majesty of the law—inevitable, procedural, sure" (48). However, Sergeant Fortrell is also, in a sense, "a poor man's De Selby," embodying an understanding of physics that is only slightly more nuanced than that of his more rural brethren, and still as intensely parochial. He, too, espouses the fear of miscegenation that can result from too-frequent intercourse between bicycle and man, and is willing to steal to "guard members of the human race, sometimes from themselves" (92).

Unlike the other policemen, however, Sergeant Fortrell is not depicted as a dangerous imbecile playing with a supernatural power he does not understand and "making ribbons out of the natural order." Instead, Fortrell accepts that there are things beyond his understanding

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[33] Sergeant Fortrell highlights Mick's peripatetic discontent when he describes him as "in pure divine essence a personality who *rides* a bicycle" when [he has] intercourse with it at all" (153).

and in these instances, he "must take my superior officer to be the Man Above" (92). Because he willingly relinquishes his control over Providence, he is a simple and content man, living a life based on faith and eschewing the luxuries of self reflection or guilt: "Ever a forward looking man, the sergeant clearly regarded their own night's work as something done and finished with, a book closed, a meal eaten, a thing never to be mentioned again or even thought of" (158).

In *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive* O'Brien again remaps familiar landscapes, imbuing them with a mixture of the mundane and miraculous. The Irish midlands become an existentialist hell, and the suburbs surrounding Dublin become the "vestibule of a heavenly conspection" (7). Much like Kavanagh's achievement of comedic detachment (his parochial ideal) in *Tarry Flynn*, O'Brien achievement of this mixing of the miraculous and mundane, or polysemy, also signals his achievement of his ideal—to conjoin formal exactitude and the quotidian into a single style.

In addition, O'Brien added a new wrinkle to parochialism, the appreciation of the ability to synthesize experience with new ideas in order to come to an idiosyncratic, yet workable way of understanding

phenomenon. This is a trait he embodied in his "Plain People of Ireland," Mr. Collopy, and Sergeant Fortrell. In some ways, O'Brien seemed to envy these characters their ability to be "ever forward looking;" he, on the other hand was never able to achieve this level of detachment from the ideas he wrote about, specifically the nature of existence and of eternity.

Perhaps because of the failure for the *Third Policeman* and perhaps because of his gradually failing health and growing alcoholism, O'Brien seems to be more involved with these questions in his own life. In fact, a companion piece to *The Dalkey Archive* is an article he wrote in 1965 for *The Guardian* titled "Can a Saint Hit Back?" In it, he lists the various ailments and incidents of ill fortune that had befallen him as a result of St. Augustine enacting vengeance upon him for his depiction of the Saint in *The Dalkey Archive* and subsequent stage version of the novel, *When the Saints Go Cycling In.* O'Brien claims in the article that he "suffered prostrations, fits, deadly uremia, a broken leg and impartation twice of the Last Rites of the Church." In addition, he blames the confusion surrounding his correct date of birth on "back-dated vengeance by the

Saint."[34] Stephen Jones calls this "one writer's deadly struggle with a character," but it is also one writer's struggle with himself and his uncertainty about his own literary identity. Unlike Kavanagh, who found peace with himself and his career in creating a rural idyll on the banks of the Grand Canal, O'Brien never really found his *hegira*

[34] Flann O'Brien, "Can a Saint Hit Back," in Stephen Jones, *A Flann O'Brien Reader* (New York: Viking, 1978) 382-383.

Conclusion: Brendan Behan and the Next Generation of Parochial Writers

In this dissertation, I have proposed that Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien each be reconsidered in light of his articulation of a parochial vision, one that privileged the remapping of both familiar and not-so familiar literary landscapes and that amplified the idiosyncratic voices of the Irish rural and suburban middle classes over the stock voices promoted by the revival. To borrow a term coined by critic Simon During, these writers created a "civil imaginary": a representation of society that forms a secular social order distinct from nationalist narratives.[1]

Kavanagh and O'Brien were not the only writers in the early to mid-twentieth century who engaged in this enterprise. The works of Brinsley MacNamara, Padraic Colum, John B. Keane, Francis MacManus, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Kate O'Brien, and even Sean O' Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell might all be reexamined in light of this project. Brendan Behan, however, is perhaps the most representative of writers at this time who responded to this cultural legacy by articulating a parochial

[1] Simon During, "Literature—Nationalism's Other? The Case for Revision," Homi Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) 138-53.

vision. Combining Kavanagh's specificity of place and articulation of ideological boundaries with the hybridity engendered by O'Brien's subatomic collision of traditions, ideologies, and physical spaces, Behan created what might be termed an "urban" parochial vision, in which certain neglected Dublin populations negotiated a changing Ireland within claustrophobic tenements and prison cells. By alternating between I.R.A. "hard man" and an artist who personally embodied a mixture of political ideologies, social classes, and sexualities, Behan also highlighted the hypocrisy of deValera's Ireland in its failure to provide a place for certain unwelcome populations, including the very people who had once fought for its freedom.

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Behan is often seen as the bohemian foil to the more conservative and middle-class Kavanagh and O'Brien. Behan himself often stated that his problems in literary Dublin were a result of class differences, but this

was possibly an exaggeration.[2] Though he claimed that he was born on the working class Northside of Dublin in a "Georgian House that had gone to rack and ruin as a tenement,"[3] he was in fact born on the more fashionable Southside.[4] As biographer Michael O'Sullivan explains, "if, … the Behan family carried a certain bourgeois 'taint', Brendan never cared to acknowledge it."[5]

A more significant difference between Behan and Kavanagh and O'Brien, however, is that Behan grew up in a staunchly Republican family. His uncle Peadar Kearney wrote the lyrics of *TheSol dier's Song*, which became the Irish National Anthem, and his mother worked for a period in Maude Gonne's house. Consequently, Behan had far greater access to canonical Irish writers and traditional songs and poems than Kavanagh or O'Brien. Stephen Behan, Brendan's father, read to his children in both English and Latin, providing his children with a familiarity with works as varied as *The Pickwick Papers*, the works of Thackeray, Samuel Pepys's Diary, *Tom Jones*, Charles Kickham's

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[2] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*. (Boulder, CO: Roberts Rinehart, 1999), 149.

[3] Brendan Behan and Paul Hogarth, *Brendan Behan's Island* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1962), 14.

[4] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, xi.

[5] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 13.

Knocknagow, the plays of Shaw, Synge, and O'Casey, as well as the poetry of Yeats and the works of Dostoyevsky, Zola, and Maupassant.[6]

Nevertheless, Behan ultimately shared a great deal with Kavanagh and O'Brien, specifically the sense that the time for nationalist symbols had passed. As Sean O'Faolain wrote in 1940: "these [symbols] belong … to the time when we growled in defeat and dreamed of the future."[7] In addition, all three were of a generation in which traditional ideas about narrative and fiction were under scrutiny. As a result, each had to find both a way to express himself and his experience, while also addressing the ever-increasing skepticism about the nature of fiction, realism, and fantasy.[8] Granted, Kavanagh and O'Brien wrote the majority of their works earlier in the century, whereas Behan's slightly later arrival on the Irish literary scene coincided with more contentious argument about the nature of Irish literary criticism and the purpose of criticism in Irish society more generally. Consequently, critics often inaccurately align

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[6] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 18-19.

[7] Sean O'Faolain, "Editorial: This is Your Magazine," *The Bell* 1:1 (October 1940), 5. Qtd in John Brannigan, "Belated Behan: Brendan Behan and the Cultural Politics of Memory," *Eire-Ireland* (Fall-Winter: 2002): 39-54.

[8] Declan Kiberd, "Gaelic Absurdism: *At Swim-Two-Birds*," in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 511.

Behan more directly with the revisionist project of *The Bell* and ignore his many ties to Kavanagh and O'Brien.

These ties deserve further critical exploration. When I first began to research my dissertation, which originally focused on O'Brien, I found multiple sources linking Kavanagh, O'Brien, and Behan. The most notable of these was Declan Kiberd's statement that Kavanagh, O'Brien, and Behan constituted a "doom and drink-sodden triumvirate."[9] The prevalence of anecdotal and circumstantial links between these three writers is also apparent in John Ryan's *Remembering How We Stood*, Anthony Cronin's *Dead as Doornails*, and Brian Behan's play *The Begrudgers*.[10] There has been little linking these writers critically, however, except to compare their failures or to show them as literary "begrudgers," placing them, as Donald Torchiana does in the *Chicago Review* in 1964, within a "generation of literary pretenders… who spend much time praising, criticizing, explaining… the work of men they hate: Joyce, Yeats,

[9] Declan Kiberd, "Writers in Quarantine? The Case for Irish Studies," *Crane Bag* III (1979): 20. Qtd. in Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 181.

[10] ***The Begrudgers***, set in postwar Dublin, explores the literary rivalry between Brendan Behan, Flann O'Brien, and Patrick Kavanagh.

and O'Casey."[11] Indeed, as Terence Brown claims, these three writers are seen as a diversion from more canonical Irish literature:

> … each of the careers of Patrick Kavanagh, Brian O'Nolan, and Brendan Behan shows the terrible marks of years of public indifference or misunderstanding. The only future that seemed open to the Irish writer in the late 1940's and early 1950's was penury in his own country or an appeal to the wider public gallery through eccentricity, showmanship, and bravado that would distract both public and the writer from the serious business of his art.[12]

While none of these writers fell into penury *per se*, O'Brien's works suffered relative obscurity outside of Ireland, except for the minor cult status attained by *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. Kavanagh and Behan, embracing "eccentricity, showmanship, and bravado," became caricatures of themselves in the public eye. Behan was, as Donald Torchiana describes him 1964, a "juvenile delinquent," while Kavanagh was, even worse, "a professional peasant" who "shouldn't really exist."[13] Even so, Torchiana grudgingly admits that Kavanagh possesses "probably

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[11] Donald Torchiana, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," *Chicago Review* 17:2/3 (1964): 156.

[12] Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (London: Fontana, 1981), 181.

[13] Donald Torchiana, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," 164.

the strongest, most sustained voice in Ireland since Yeats."[14] Critical forecasts of Behan's importance were not so positive, however; Terence de Vere White felt that Behan's literary reputation was "unlikely to grow with the passage of time."[15]

Because they are generally portrayed as diversions from established models in the Irish literary tradition, Kavanagh and O'Brien are considered rogue players[16] in the twentieth century debates over competing conceptions of Irish cultural identity—that is, if they are considered at all. As Ireland moved into the 1940s and '50s, these debates were increasingly between state-supported cultural production and contemporary writers and artists who exposed the gaps and contradictions present in de Valera's carefully constructed vision of Ireland. Critics present these debates as if they had been waged primarily by bohemian writers such as Behan and O'Faolain. However, as I've shown in this dissertation, Kavanagh and O'Brien address the same gaps and contradictions in their works. Kavanagh, for example, depicts the

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[14] Donald Torchiana, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," 159.

[15] Terence de Vere White, *Ireland* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 102.

[16] As I point out in Chapter 1, Kavanagh is often seen as a "literary outlaw," a label which implies a certain separation from any established literary trends.

heterogeneity of the supposedly homogeneous rural population in poems such as "Shancoduff." The gaps and contradictions in the nationalist vision of Ireland are manifested quite literally in the Irish landscapes of O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*. Behan's own literary project bears significant similarities to that of Kavanagh and O'Brien. In fact, Behan may be seen as a link between two seemingly disparate literary camps: the more conservative and middle-class Kavanagh and O'Brien and the bohemian and activist writers of *The Bell.* More specifically, Behan uses the parochial vision of Kavanagh and O'Brien to address a key element of *The Bell*'s revisionist project—cultural memory.

John Brannigan refers to the critical project of this time as a struggle between "competing versions of cultural memory"[17] and places Behan at the forefront. Behan addresses this issue by portraying the nation's cultural amnesia, which is shared by both the Irish people, for whom the past has little relevance, and by the government, who conveniently leaves out certain views of Ireland in the nationalist panorama. Behan also portrays characters burdened by false memory, which is an attempt to fill

[17] Brannigan, "Belated Behan: Brendan Behan and the Cultural Politics of Memory," 41.

the gaps created by cultural amnesia with compensatory representations of history.

Behan's writings for the *Irish Press* during the 1950s most clearly show the struggle with cultural memory that so concerned the writers of *The Bell*. Behan describes the kind of mass hypnosis resulting from being inundated with the images and the rhetoric of 1916. In "The Family Was in the Rising," for example, Behan describes his personal reaction to watching a melodramatic film of the burning of the GPO, an act that had happened seven years before he was born:

> When I was nine years old I could have given you a complete account of what happened from Mount Street Bridge out to the Battle of Ashbourne … and could have given you a fuller description of Easter, 1916 than many an older man. You see, they were mostly confined to one garrison—I had fought at them all.[18]

The representation is authentic in its mapping and sequencing of events, but it presents a battlescape devoid of players. Because of this, the representation is broad enough and generic enough for anyone to appropriate it as a memory, except for those individuals who were actually involved. These individuals would have had a more idiosyncratic

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[18] Brendan Behan, "The Family Was in the Rising," *The Dubbalin Man* (Dublin: A. & A. Farmar, 1997), 75-78. Originally published in *The Irish Press*, 11 April 1955.

and specific memory of the events. For the broad majority of the Irish population, however, the simulacra seemed completely authentic.

Behan shows how this phenomenon, which assumes a certain hegemony, confirms not a pure and essential Irishness, but rather Ireland's hybridity. As Behan shows in his *Irish Press* column in 1956, scenes from the Great War dominated the imagination of Dublin at that time as much as depictions of the Rising. Behan recalls that, when watching a documentary on Gallipoli with army widows, he himself constructed a false memory: "I'm now going to give my eyewitness account of my father's death in action at the Dardanelles."[19] As it turns out, he puts on this act to get cake and tea and is soon exposed as a young liar whose father "was in the I.R.Ah."[20] However, the widows manifest false memories, too, as they claim that they see their dead husbands on the screen. His own grandmother even sees his great uncle in the face of "a bearded Indian," leaving young Brendan "impressed by the Granny's relations."[21]

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[19] Brendan Behan, "My Father Died in War," *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 89.

[20] Brendan Behan, "My Father Died in War," 91.

[21] Brendan Behan, "My Father Died in War," 91.

In his *Irish Press* columns, then, Behan evokes a city and society that were finding change difficult as they headed in to the latter part of the century. Dublin had not changed much when Behan was released from his first stint in prison in September1946. Post war Dublin was still Georgian, but the signs of decline were already present. Cattle were driven down the streets, children ran barefoot, and the principal means of transport was the bicycle. Peat smoke was everywhere, and people lived with the same rationing as the English. Culturally, Dublin had been slow to emerge from the isolation and social decline imposed by neutrality and by years of exposure to the stultifying effects of 'Gaelic Irelandism,' de Valera's pious philosophy of cultural and economic self-sufficiency.[22]

This period of transition was marked by another phenomenon of memory—a kind of cultural amnesia engendered by the state as it turned its back on certain populations. This was a new sort of "hidden Ireland," peopled with petty criminals, murderers, prostitutes, ex-I.R.A. men, and homosexuals. This illicit Ireland was as hidden as Corkery's "Hidden Ireland" because it did not fit into de Valera's narrative. Consequently, its denizens were relegated to the prison cells, crumbling Big Houses, and

[22] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 123.

bordello rooms portrayed in Behan's works, most notably *The Quare Fellow*, *The Big House*, and *The Hostage.* Behan is intensely concerned with how the underclass made do with the leavings of the past and tried to cobble together a tradition, or simply a life, from the detritus of war and economic instability.

Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* (1954) links two seemingly unrelated historical events—the first Irish language drama to be presented on the Dublin stage and a House of Commons debate on capital punishment. Behan's original title for the play was *Casadh Sugáin Eile (The Twisting of Another Rope)* in reference to Douglas Hyde, whose *Casadh an tSugáin (The Twisting of the Rope)* is generally regarded as the first Irish language play performed on the Dublin stage, in 1901. Hyde's play portrays a group of villagers conspiring to banish the poet Hanrahan, whose powerful curses they fear, from a community dance. They trick him into twisting a hay rope that eventually becomes so long that it forces him outside the building. There are many interpretations of the play, from Hanrahan representing the English, to Hanrahan representing the true Gaelic Ireland shunned by Anglicized modern Ireland. However, in all of these

interpretations, the theme of punishment, banishment, and factionalism, all represented by the rope, remain.[23]

O'Sullivan claims that Behan named his play in homage to Hyde to garner the interest of the Abbey Theatre.[24] This may have been the case, but a closer look at the play suggests that Behan might have been simultaneously exploiting and subverting the connection. As Brannigan has suggested, each of Behan's major writings enters into "a belated exchange with the literary and cultural legacies of the Irish nationalist revival."[25] In other words, Behan engages in a dialogue with Hyde's play to show the legacy of cultural nationalism and provide a critique of it by addressing the amnesia of the past several decades and exploring the way different groups have tried to construct a cultural memory to fill the void.

Hyde's nationalist play, no matter what the interpretation, assumes a certain hegemony; in order to understand the humor of the play, the audience must be familiar with the provincial rivalries of Connacht and Munster. While Hyde creates a familiar microcosm of the rural idyll in

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[23] As Brannigan points out, the rope is associated twice in the play with hanging. Brannigan,"Belated Behan: Brendan Behan and the Cultural Politics of Memory," 46.

[24] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 176.

[25] John Brannigan, "Belated Behan: Brendan Behan and the Cultural Politics of Memory," 45.

which the conflict is no greater than a poet from a rival region attempting to seduce a local girl, Behan creates in the unfamiliar space of the prison a microcosm representing the dystopia that is the Free State. The narrative of contentment proffered in Hyde's play, as well as in post-independence political discourse, is exposed in *The Quare Fellow* as hypocritical; this narrative exists and proliferates because of the Free State's amnesiatic attitude towards a variety of economic and social ills.

These social and economic ills are manifested in the prison by the prisoners' reconstruction of the same class system that marginalized them on the outside. The keyclass distinction is between the Quare Fellow and Silver Top, or Lifer. The rural Quare Fellow killed his brother with a meat chopper, a murder that the other prisoners characterize as a "real bog man act."[26] Silver Top, on the other hand, killed his wife with a silver-topped cane and was reprieved while the Quare Fellow was not. Because Silver Top is not rural, and because his choice of murder weapon shows that he is of a higher class than the average criminal, he is seen by the prisoners as "a cut above meat-choppers whichever way you look at it" (42). This

[26] Brendan Behan, *The Quare Fellow* in *Behan: The Complete Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 42. This version of the play is from the first London production in 1956, directed by Joan Littlewood. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

distinction between two comparable murders highlights both the hypocrisy of the system as well as the prisoners' indoctrination within it.

The economic and social ills of the Free State have also created a situation in which some prisoners are better off inside than they would be on the streets. Dunlavin and Neighbor, for example, describe their lives on the outside so full of cold and sickness "all you could do … was to lean over on your side and wish that God would call you" (61). Poignantly, Silver Top considers himself entitled to his freedom and comfort on the outside, while Dunlavin quietly admits that he and Neighbor are "selfish… like everyone else" for wanting simple shelter and regular food. Notably, the figure that is entirely outside the class system, the untouchable within the prison, is Other Fellow, the homosexual. Most of the other prisoners are unwilling to abide "that class of carry-on—" (43), a fact borne out by Behan's description in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* of the treatment of a group of coal miners arrested for sodomy.

This class system in which the prisoners are primarily known by their crime or their sentence also relies on a sense of dehumanization. The production of the play, according to O'Sullivan, with two sparse sets and its all-male cast "powerfully captured the stultifying nature of prison

confinement."[27] This process of dehumanization makes the prisoners as well as the warders and other prison officials hardened towards capital punishment in general. An anomaly within "a nominally liberal society,"[28] as Brannigan refers to it, capital punishment relies on the dehumanization and the perpetuation of a sense of amnesia for its very existence. It has to remain a pure abstraction for it to be an acceptable practice. The first step to making it a pure abstraction is to remove all traces of a prisoner's identity. The Quare Fellow, for example, is never referred to by a name, and his identification number is changed on the tombstone from E779 to E777 simply because "a '7' is easier … to do than a '9'" (123).

The prisoner's lack of identity allows the officials to hide behind laws to justify what is for all intents and purposes the murder of another human being, as Warder Regan explains to the Chief: "You think the law makes this man's death someway different, not like anyone else's. Your own, for instance" (113). The official's attitude is similar to Policeman Pluck's explanation to the narrator in *The Third Policeman* that because he has no identity "we can take you and hang the life out of you . . . and there

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[27] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 208.

[28] John Brannigan, "Belated Behan: Brendan Behan and the Cultural Politics of Memory," 46.

is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death . . . only an insanitary abstraction in the back yard."[29] Much like the mysterious policemen in *The Third Policeman*, the prison officials in *The Quare Fellow* have also assumed an authority not rightfully theirs—the ability to take a life. In this they have put themselves above God, treating him as simply another civil servant "so as you'd think that God was in another department, but not long off the Bog, and they were doing Him a great turn to be talking well about Him" (63).

The second step in making capital punishment an acceptable practice is to create in the general public a sense of amnesia about the process. Consequently, all the public knows about an execution is either the vague and passive notice in the newspapers—"Condemned man entered the hang-house at seven fifty-nine. At eight three the doctor pronounced life extinct" (45)—or the sentimental outpourings of the condemned, published from the letters the other prisoners take from the grave to send to the newspapers for cash. If they knew what the prisoners know about execution, the public might be disposed against it. Thus, Behan subverts the sanitizing aspects of state executions by having the

[29] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (New York: Plume, 1967), 102.

prisoners describe an execution, from the agony of the night before to the face of the hanged man after he is cut down. In this way, Behan tries to create a new memory to replace the public's amnesia about capital punishment.

The London performance of *The Quare Fellow* coincided with a House of Commons Debate on capital punishment.[30] It is not clear what, if any, influence the play had on the public's view of capital punishment; reviews instead focused on Behan's use of language. Kenneth Tynan's review in *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, uses descriptions of Behan and his work that would later become a kind of prison cell for the writer: "The English hoard words like misers; the Irish spend them like sailors; and in Brendan Behan's tremendous new play language is out on a spree, ribald, dauntless, and spoiling for a fight."[31] Behan would address the issue of capital punishment again in *The Hostage*, but it would take a back seat to issues of class and the inheritance of the Ascendancy and the Rising—the two topics that are the focus of *The Big House* (1957) and *The Hostage* (1958). In *TheBig House* , a radio program produced in 1957 for the BBC, a

[30] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 207.

[31] E. H. Mikhail, *Letters of Brendan Behan*, pp. 86ff. Qtd. in O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 208.

Dubliner and a Cockney raid Tonesollock House, the last remaining big house in the region, whose owners have fled during the final days of the Irish Civil War. The play depicts two moments of historical crisis: the end of the Civil War and the end of the Ascendancy. In addition, the play shows Behan's fascination with different ethnic and social classes; all the characters are participants in or victims of the imperial past. At the center of this crisis, however, is the Tonesollock House itself.

The house frames the play. Not only does the action of the play take place primarily within the house, but its speeches open and close the play. Like Mather's house in *The Third Policemen*, Tonesollock House is both a catalyst and a constant. As the site of crisis and struggle, it is an artifact of imperialism and therefore an intrusion on the landscape. Despite this, however, it is also the only structure to withstand the forces of history, described by the house as "war, riot, and civil commotion." [32] All of the other houses, as well as the Civic Guard barracks, have been bombed. The house, like its owners, pines for the return of the Ascendancy, having lived through the bad times of "common people and

[32] Brendan Behan, *The Big House* in *Behan: The Complete Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 384. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

their noisy children" to prepare for the happiness of the return "from the towns and cities, my dear horse-faced ladies, and my owners" (384).

Within the space of Tonesollock House meet the players in the imperial drama: the current owners, the Baldcocks, the Civic Guard, and the loyal Butler Looney. Together, they represent not only the opportunism of the imperial past—the Baldcocks cheated Cromwell's soldiers out of the land after the soldiers had taken it from the Irish residents—but also the feudal system of the Anglo-Irish past. Looney's ancestors, for example, go just as far back as the Baldcocks; Ananias Baldcock proudly, yet naively says that as long as his family has lived there, "there has always been a Looney in Tonesollock House" (363). Either opportunism or a simple instinct for self-preservation led Looney's ancestors to attach themselves to the Baldcocks and Tonesollock House. The two families' connection is not a historical anomaly. As Clark and Donnelly have shown, a bond existed between the peasant and the old elite, who, even though they typically exploited the peasant's labor, had

also provided protection and aid in times of trouble. Modernization weakened that bond.[33]

The Civic Guard, "merely the old Royal Irish Constabulary with their cap badges changed" (364) also have a symbiotic, yet ambivalent relationship to the big house and its history. Formerly in service to "King and Country" they now serve the Free State, which, as Ananias sees, is the best way to beat the rebels: "Even Lord Birkenhead says so. 'Doing England's work, with an economy of English lives.'" In other words, the Civic Guard not only serves evictions, but they put themselves in harm's way to protect the Anglo-Irish way of life. They benefit by having a parasitic relationship to the Ascendency, represented in *The Third Policeman* by the rogue barracks inside the walls of Mather's house and in Behan's play by the Guards squatting in the Tonesollock House.

The end of the Civil War and the end of the Ascendancy has created space for opportunistic individuals in which to move and perhaps even create new identities; the crisis has paved the way for a new regime. The new master of the house is Chuckles Genocky. Originally "from the

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[33] Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr., Introduction to *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Clark and Donnelly (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 6.

slums of Dublin" and who never "had as much land as would fill a window-box" (369), Chuckles, by virtue of his relationship to the Baldcocks, identifies himself now as gentry, or what he calls the persecuted "ex-Unionist minority" (371). He has no political or nationalistic agenda behind his tricking the Baldcocks or gutting their house, which he and his friend Angel set to doing the moment they arrive: "I don't go in for this lark 'on our side was Erin and virtue, on their side the Saxon and guilt'" (374). He is more interested in evening out class inequities, but only when it benefits himself: "I just don't see why old Baldcock should have a lot of lolly and live in a big house while I go out to graft every morning and come home to a rat trap" (374). Having used the Baldcocks to set himself up in a higher social bracket, Chuckles later takes on another opportunistic identity—Gaelic scholar. At the end of the play, he presents himself as a French Professor of Celtic Studies, specifically Belfast and Glasgow Celtic. Of course, Belfast and Glasgow Celtic are both football clubs, a detail which escapes the confused Baldcocks.[34]

[34] Although Belfast Celtic was a non-sectarian team, it had to drop out of play several times in the early part of the twentieth century due to sectarian violence. The club left competitive football for good in 1949 after the team was attacked by rival fans.

After opportunism, another possibility offered by the historical crisis is anarchy. On Chuckles' encouragement, the denizens of the local pub take over Tonesollock House for a night of debauchery. This crowd is the dispossessed, an illicit version of O'Brien's "Plain People of Ireland." At the center of this crew are Granny Growl, also known as Maria Concepta, and Granny Grunt, also known as Teresa Avila, recurring characters from Behan's column in the *Irish Press*. Granny Growl and Granny Grunt are two old bawds whose many husbands have been involved in various British military and imperial campaigns. One husband was shot in the Dardanelles ("a most paintful [sic] part of the body to be shot"), another was "et be the Ashantees," and yet another was a Fusilier in the Boer War (379). In their burlesque recitation of their husband's violent deaths, they show both a cultural amnesia and an attempt to compensate with memories that may or may not be entirely true. In short, they are incapable of understanding history, yet they are aligned with it in unexpected and self-constructed ways. They are the harbingers of an Ireland that is not served by the national vision, but instead by opportunistic figures like Chuckles and Angel. Consequently, they take the leavings of the past and make out of it what they can—a party.

This theme of the dispossessed making do with the rubble of history is continued in *The Hostage* (1958), in which Behan combines the crisis and subsequent amnesia of history with themes of retribution and a meditation on capital punishment. The entire play takes place in a run-down boarding house-cum-bordello; as in his other works, Behan's cast of characters is wholly comprised of the detritus of a historical moment. The residents of the boarding house include an I.R.A. fanatic, a self-described "ex-hero," a civil servant, and a collection of prostitutes and homosexuals. Raymond Williams writes that *The Hostage* is "not so much an Irish scene as a microcosm of disorganisation and restlessness"[35] built, literally, on the rubbish of the past.[36] The world of the play is in upheaval; politics, nationalism, religion, the military, and love are all presented as grotesque parody.[37]

One central conflict in the play is between old and new Irelands, both of which are vying for control of the house. Monsewer, the actual

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[35] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London: Penguin 1964), 305. Qtd. in *Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgments,* ed. Ronald Ayling (London: Macmillan, 1969), 20.

[36] In the basement of the house are the contents of another house that fell down a few weeks previously.

[37] Gordon M. Wickstrom, "The Heroic Dimension in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage,*" *Educational Theater Journal* 22:4 (1970: Dec.) 408.

owner of the house, is a send-up of Gaelic-speaking Englishmen who represented to Behan fanatical Republicanism. Monsewer is a pure anachronism whose passionate devotion to the I.R.A. and the Gaelic culture has alienated him from the present. He recalls Finn in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, whose audience does not understand his strange utterances. The problem here, however, is that Monsewer speaks Irish, a language that many urban dwellers he meets do not speak. As Pat explains, "when he went on a tram or a bus he had to have an interpreter with him so the conductor would know where he wanted to get off."[38] In addition to losing himself in the Irish language, Monsewer has also reconstructed his reality so that he believes the house is full of Gaels, patriots, and Republicans on the run. At one time the house did host such figures, but that did not pay the rent, as Pat explains. In order to make the place pay, "this noble old house, which housed so many heroes, was turned into a knocking shop" (147). The residents all play along with Monsewer, however, following orders and falling in for regular inspections. Perhaps they do this out of respect for someone who represents a history they have

[38] Brendan Behan, *The Hostage, Behan: The Complete Plays* Introduced by Alan Simpson. (New York: Grove Press, 1973) 140. All subsequent in-text citations are to this edition.

little connection to, or perhaps it is something they have to abide in order to live in the house.

All of the characters except for Monsewer are aware that they are simply playing roles on a stage. Pat, the "ex-hero," is the stage master, negotiating between old and new Ireland. He is loyal to Monsewer because they were "soldiers of Ireland in the old day" (132). However, Pat also believes that "the days of the heroes are over this forty years past. … The I.R.A. and the War of Independence are as dead as the Charleston" (132). The modern I.R.A. is nothing but "white-faced loons with their berets and trench coats and teetotal badges" (211). Because of his ambivalence towards the past, he resents Monsewer demanding that he "prepare a room" (131) for the past in his Ireland, as it takes the guise of the modern I.R.A. he sees as obsolete. Pat's loyalty to Monsewer has him stuck between the past and the present, leaving him "a Republican butler… A Sinn Fein skivvy," as Meg calls him (212). His own ambivalence to the past leads him to construct false memories, too, to justify the loss of his leg and his unflagging yet seemingly unwarranted loyalty to Monsewer. As he tells the story of being a commandant at Mullingar during the Civil War, the details become fuzzier and fuzzier:

Mullingar becomes Cork; his wounded left fot becomes his right foot, and the one fatality, a County Surveyor "out measuring the roads and not interfering with politics one way or the other" becomes piles of dead along the roads (210). The others in the house construct false memories, too, to make up for their own cultural amnesia. No one has any memory of the Civil War or even an understanding of its outcome, so they ask Pat to tell them his stories. The one exception is the male prostitute Rio Rita who claims to have been Michael Collins's runner, operating on the side opposite of Pat in the Civil War: "I did my bit in O'Connell Street, with the rest of them." However, as Mulleady points out to Rio Rita, "That was over thirty years ago—you weren't even born" (146).

Behan thus suggests that the reality of war may have been too much to handle and that people therefore choose the representation or constructed memory over the real. Meg explains that "there are some things you can't forget," like "here in Russell Street, right next to the place where I was born, the British turned a tank and fired shells into people's homes" (202). This is one of the few moments in the play when a character tells a complete story about their role in 1916 or in the Civil War. Most of the time, however, characters resort to the shared invented past, singing

adapted rebel songs such as "Who fears to speak of Easter Week" and "The Laughing Boy."

The catalyst for this conflict between the old and new Ireland is Leslie, the British soldier kidnapped from the Armagh barracks and held hostage against the release of an I.R.A. prisoner. Leslie is a doppelganger for the boy in the Belfast jail. They are about the same age, of the same class, and neither wants, nor wants the other to die. They are simply pawns for their respective leaders. Monsewer envies the I.R.A. prisoner for his chance to die a martyr's death. Leslie, on the other hand, knows that nothing happening to him will upset the British Government: "I suppose you all think they're sitting around in the West End clubs with handkerchiefs over their eyes, dropping tears into their double whiskies" (217). Nothing really distinguishes one from the other; each man simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The residents of the boarding house can also see something in Leslie that they relate to—his youth, innocence, and budding and impressionable sexuality. Even Monsewer is moved by "this uncouth youth" to sing a song in praise of being English and white. In the reaction of the others to Leslie, and in Monsewer's definition of race as occurring

"when a lot of people live in one place for a long period of time" (189), Behan posits that Irish parochial allegiances can no longer be tolerated; there should be room in the national narrative for Leslie and for everyone else who lives in the house. Specifically, in his placement of the English Leslie as the hero of an Irish play, Behan privileges compromise; he neither glorifies the I.R.A. nor vilifies the British. Rather, he legitimately criticizes both. In the end, the deaths of the I.R.A. boy and Leslie have nothing at all to do with nationalist or heroic values. Instead their deaths are much less abstract and due to specifically personal and depressing reasons, as Theresa explains to Pat: "It wasn't the Belfast Jail or the Six Counties that was troubling you, but your lost youth and your crippled leg" (236).

The play itself is a revision of history. The setting of the original Irish version of the play, *An Giall*, is a house that existed in Nelson Street on Dublin's Northside, where Behan claims he was born. *An Giall* is an amalgam of two stories: the capture of a British Tommy at Ballykinlar Camp, Co. Down, 1955, and an ambush of 1921 in which young soldiers were killed. In addition, *An Giall* deals with Partition, the revival of Irish,

and deValera's arrogance.[39] In *An Giall,* the soldier dies during a police raid when he smothers in the closet his captors hide him in. In *The Hostage,* however, the soldier is shot during a raid instigated by Mulleady, Rio Rita, and Rio Rita's black boyfriend, Princess Grace. *An Giall* did not get produced in Dublin until 1958, but because it dealt with a contemporary theme and took place in an urban setting, it was received enthusiastically its first night. Some I.R.A. supporters were outraged at the portrayal of Monsewer, but others had been growing weary of the fanatics and agreed with Behan's criticism.

Joan Littlewood later translated *An Giall* for her Theatre Workshop. Its new form, *The Hostage*, confirmed Behan's international success, but some in Dublin saw it as a betrayal. A number of Irish critics condemned the English version as "trivial and destructive of the integrity of the original work."[40] Littlewood's production caused further rumblings that Behan had sold out his Republican principles for the London stage and that *The Hostage* was merely a tragi-comic musical extravaganza intended solely to entertain British audiences.[41] Sadly, the controversy surrounding

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[39] *Independent*, 5 October 1994.
[40] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 223.
[41] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 238.

Littlewood's production (as well as Behan's own extravagant persona) overshadowed the play itself. As with *The Quare Fellow*, Kenneth Tynan's first night review focused more on the raucous nature of the work rather than the author's attempt at cultural and political criticism. Tynan makes reference to the "bloodshot eyes of Mr. Behan's talent," the "noisy and incessant action," and the "blasphemous and lecherously gay songs."[42] Again, Behan had been upstaged by his own image.

Behan the Rebel took on the mantle of "doom and drink-sodden" and, unfortunately, this persona became, for many critics and audiences, more compelling than his plays. Joan Littlewood, the producer of the London productions of *The Hostage* and *The Quare Fellow*, wondered to what sources Behan really owed his fame: "Whether it was *The Quare Fellow* or the drink that put Brendan on the map, I'll never know…"[43] On 18 June 1956, Behan made history as the first man to appear drunk on the

[42] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 239.

[43] Joan Littlewood, *Joan's Book: Joan Littlewood's Peculiar History As She Tells It*, 472. Qtd. in Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 211.

BBC when he was interviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge on *Panorama.* As his biographer Michael O'Sullivan states: "It was as if in some God given moment of self-realisation he had suddenly seen the publicity benefits of his own outrageous behavior: One drunken television appearance appeared to have turned a struggling playwright into an overnight household name." [44]

In a very short amount of time, Behan had built a worldwide reputation, earning him the nicknames "Fourteen Pint Behan," "the Irish Dylan Thomas," and "the Irish Jean Genet."[45] Even reviews of his works could not escape using the same language they used to describe the belligerent and rambling caricature Behan was becoming.[46] Some critics, particularly Irish ones, were able to see through the act, hinting that there was not much underneath the bravado. An unsigned piece in *The Irish Times* provides a particularly backhanded hope that the real Behan would someday show himself:

> Brendan Behan is very much a 'character'—TV and the popular illustrated magazines have done their best to make him so. The 'character' whose talk everyone enjoys, but whose writings no-one ever sees, is a familiar feature of the Dublin scene… One hopes his

[44] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 210-211.
[45] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 264.
[46] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 208.

> native wit and good sense will see him through the treacherous shoals, and that the thin, reflective man imprisoned in his lurid and showy frame will be allowed to have his say.[47]

More important to here, however, is the role that Behan played in Irish literary history. As I have shown in this project, certain writers of the early to mid-twentieth century, Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien specifically, have either been overlooked or misrepresented in critical examinations of twentieth century culture. Since these writers do not fit neatly into any of the established literary movements—the revival, modernism, bohemian Dublin of the mid century—they are seen as literary outsiders, or diversions. Critics tend to consider them only in reaction to these same traditions. Thus, they are considered "begrudgers," or, at the very worst, embittered failures who let their vitriol for their rival writers cloud their potential.

As I've shown here, however, Kavanagh and O'Brien borrowed liberally from the traditions that they are generally seen as reacting against, and used these borrowings to fashion articulated another way of writing and thinking about Irish culture in the early and mid-twentieth

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[47] *The Irish Times,* 13 October 1956. Qtd. in Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life,* 213.

century. Their brand of parochialism, which privileged a new way of looking at traditional landscapes, hybrid culture, and idiosyncratic rather than stock voices, provided an alternate literary current that has previously been ignored.

Kavanagh and O'Brien were not alone; Brendan Behan held a similar parochial vision, as did many other Irish writers of the twentieth century. I hope this dissertation provides a model for exhuming other writers of this generation from critical obscurity and misrepresentation. At the very least, I hope that my work provides a fresh way of looking at these writers who, in many senses, have been ignored or underrepresented because a fitting model for their work did not exist. Much more can done not only with these writers, especially Behan, but also the writers I mention at the beginning of this conclusion: Brinsley MacNamara, Padraic Colum, John B. Keane, Francis MacManus, Iris Murdoch, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, and Kate O'Brien. I hope that this project may also serve as a catalyst for future critical examination of writers who already have a rather solid critical legacy, such as Sean O'Faolain.

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Vita

Victoria Ann Davis was born in Fort Worth, Texas on July 19, 1967, the daughter of William D. and Billye F. Davis. After completing her work at Tom C. Clark High School in San Antonio, Texas in 1984, Davis entered The University of Texas at Austin. In 1988, she earned a B.A. in Communications: Radio, Television, and Film with a concentration in Film Production. Between 1989 and 1993, Davis was a Residential Instructor at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Austin, Texas. In August 1993, she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin. From 2001 to the present, Davis has been an editor at Harcourt Achieve, a textbook publisher in Austin, Texas.

Permanent Address: 1507 Broadmoor Dr., Austin, Texas 78723

This dissertation was typed by the author.